

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

JANUARY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

● **GUN-PARD FOR
HANGTOWN**

by TOM ROAN

TWO NOVELETTES

● **KING OF THE
WILD COUNTRY**

by FRED GIPSON

● **SHAVETAIL'S
TRIGGER TONIC**

by T. C. McCLARY

● **BLACKBURN**

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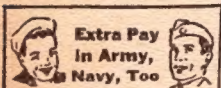
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10 FICTION BULL'S EYES IN EVERY ISSUE

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED
JANUARY 7TH

VOLUME XXIII

JANUARY, 1944

NUMBER 2

1—Complete Novel—1

GUN-PARD FOR HANGTOWN.....Tom Roan 8

Tomorrow was hangman's day in Peace City—dying day for the Polka Dot Kid—and resurrection day for the long-dead Lone Wolf of the Cimarron!

2—Feature Novelettes—2

KING OF THE WILD COUNTRY.....Fred Gipson 54

Shinery Red figured that his button brother's hot head would be best cooled by a personal meeting with a tusked wild hog!

SHAVETAIL'S TRIGGER TONIC.....T. C. McClary 76

Tough Sergeant O'Halloran was going to make that poppinjay shavetail crawl—come hell, high water or Sioux scalping knives!

7—Short Stories—7

MURDER NEWS FOR BROKEN SPOKE.....Steve Herrington 29

With a red-hot story he didn't dare print, Publisher Mallory took to his bottle—and young Dawson took to the presses!

REBELLION AT THE LAZY Y.....Morgan Lewis 36

Cattle King Yard had to postpone his man breaking till he got brass-tongued Steve at the shipping center.

PHANTOM VAQUEROS.....Tom W. Blackburn 44

Ride into the bloody San Joaquin Valley with Long John Poker—and his army of kitchen maids.

THE BATTLING HAS-BEEN.....Gunnison Steele 51

In Gramp's day they knew how to deal with human varmints. . .

BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST.....Eli Colter 66

The cook-house table was a place for the gods—until Cook Pigtail Charley sat at the bunkhouse poker table.

WILDERNESS HERITAGE.....Barry Gardner 73

Killer Kurt Jance rode his alibi straight into the grave!

RESPITE FROM THE GALLOWS.....James C. Lynch 87

For a holiday from the hangrope—an owlhooter gave a promise no man could keep.

Western Feature

THE DEVIL HAS TUSKS.....The Editor 6

Maybe you'll think so, too!

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AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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THE DEVIL HAS TUSKS

FRED GIPSON, author of "King of the Wild Country," in this issue, says there is more truth than fiction in his story about Gawdamighty Reagan, Shiny Red—and that hotheaded button Curly who was dead set on tangling with a wild tusker.

Dear Editor:

There is more truth than fiction in "King of the Wild Country." For Curly's first encounter with the wild range hog, I drew heavily upon a yarn told to me by Seth Kothman, ramrod for the Blockhouse outfit up on the San Saba River. Seth's dog cornered a brush-wild outlaw hog in a thicket against a net wire fence. The hog rushed the dogs and hung one of his long curved tusks in the wire. Seth thought he had a hog caught and stepped down off his horse. Just as he was reaching for the hog's leg, the creature lunged back, breaking off his tusk to a long sharp splinter.

Where before, his tusks had been so long and curved so freakishly that he couldn't strike with them, now the hog was as dangerous as a rattlesnake. Seth's only chance to escape was to go up on the fence. Which he did, with the hog fighting him so fast it was a long time before he could get his balance to quit the swaying fence. And when he finally did, the hog kept him on the far side of the fence so long that his horse got away from him.

Pasqual Polk, a cowhand brother-in-law of mine, had the experience of standing on an overhang of rock and roping a wild hog that jerked him down into the creek with him. It was only the swift closing in of his catch dogs that saved him from getting cut up badly, or maybe killed. I enlarged upon that incident for Curly's second encounter with the hog.

For the third round with Curly's hog, I drew upon my own experience. I tried once to pack in a couple of dry-weather shoats on a fool bronc I was breaking out for Ned Polk. I wound up in the middle of a fallen blackjack tree top, with the horse down on me and one pig still hanging in the tree. Happily, no Mexican lion tried to attack us. All I had to do was wait till my companion rider came and helped to get me out from under.

The idea for the story started with the hogs of my neighbor raiding my own watermelon patch this summer. I was ready to throw a mad fit myself, till Splittergerber discovered what had happened and told me to help myself to his melons. I came out way ahead. He had the biggest patch and the biggest melons.

I'd like to call your attention to the fact that the wild range hogs that roam this part of Texas (they're getting mighty scarce now) no more resemble the pen-fed hog than a Texas longhorn steer resembles the blue-ribbon show Hereford.

Like the longhorn, those old hogs are all head and shoulders, leggy and fast on foot as a deer, hump-backed and drawing down to a wedge-point at the rump. Their snouts are easily a foot long and they grow unbelievably long and vicious tusks. And can they use those things!

Possibly their appearance is due to a strain of razor-back blood still to be found in some of them, but I'm not certain of this. I've seen Tamworths and Hampshires that looked just as ornery, were just as wild, and fought just as viciously when cornered and riled. Maybe it's the hard-scrabble life they lead that changes their appearance.

There's a lot to be written about these old wild hogs of Texas. But too often, I'm guilty of tiring my wife with tall hog-hunting yarns. Maybe others wouldn't be so patient.

Fred Gipson

Thanks, Fred Gipson. We're sure that our readers are right with us in inviting you to come again with any and every yarn you have a hankering to spin. . . .

The next issue of 10 STORY WESTERN has a line-up of stories that will warm the heart of every dyed-in-the-wool Western fan. To start with there's, "Pilgrim of the Gun Storm," a dramatic hell-town novel by William R. Cox. Also two top-string range novelettes—"To Hell With Barbwire," by Morgan Lewis, and "Ghost Herd on the Jawbone," by Howard Bloomfield. And there are seven other bang-up, colorful Western yarns by your favorite writers. February 10 STORY WESTERN will be published January 7th!

—The Editor.

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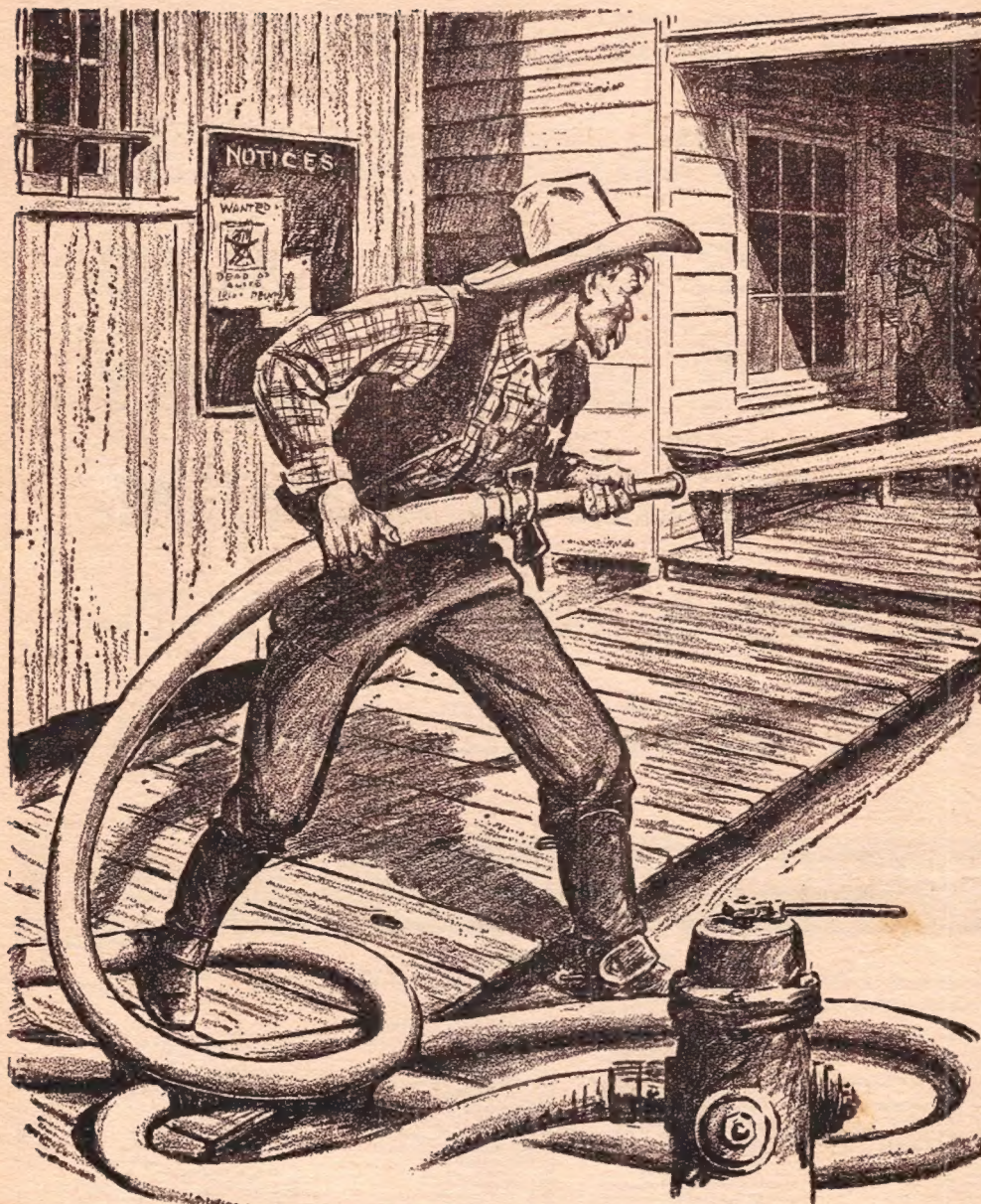
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GUN-PARD



CHAPTER ONE

Cottonwood Fruit

SHERIFF HOSS LANDLEE had not stirred out of his chair for more than two hours. A gangling man of sixty-odd, gray-mustached and

goateed, he sat tilted against the wall on the south porch of the jail and nursed the anger in his craw. His green gander eyes were inscrutable on the wheel-rutted streak of dust that Peace City proudly called its Main Street.

It was Thursday, just about half-past one o'clock, he reckoned. Tomorrow

FOR HANGTOWN



The water was like a cannon ball striking a pile of shingles . . .

Scorching Novel of a Rawhide-and-Barbwire Lawman

By TOM ROAN

Old Hoss Landlee, the toughest, trigger-tempered lawdog Cougar Canyon ever had, was sitting on the lid of seething, hate-charged Peace City. For tomorrow was hangman's day—dying day for the young Polka Dot Kid—glory day for the prisoner-hungry, cat-cruel prosecuting attorney—and resurrection day for the legendary, long-dead Lone Wolf of the Cimarron!

would be hangman's day again—and the thoughts of it soured him to the bottom of belly and soul.

Peace City was a dingy hole, perched in the mouth of Big Cougar Canyon. There were long lines of cattle pens, a boxcar without wheels for a depot, the main line and a couple of rusty side-tracks flanking the east side of it, the river beyond. The west side was quite sizable: seven saloons within a rock's throw of each other; four general stores; Patrick O'Brien's Clothing Center; the blacksmith shop; hotel; and Spike

Murphy's Honkatonk. The houses where people lived when they were not "down-town" drinking or fighting were behind all that, seventy or eighty of them perched like bird nests on the steep west wall of the canyon.

Landlee and his granddaughter lived upstairs over the jail, and it was always a source of wonder to the girl why he had stayed around this dead hole for ten years.

Hoss Landlee's green eyes were watching four horsemen take shape in the waves of July heat down in the valley.

Those fellows heading for Peace City were strangers—and a dead give-away to boot. The way they were riding told Hoss Landlee a whole lot of things other people might have never suspected.

For those strangers rode in a strung-out line, eighty or ninety yards apart—and there was something about that way of traveling that stirred a lot of memories in Hoss Landlee's old head.

Long, long in the saddle, them fellas! Long, long miles lay behind them. Their saddle stock was the pick of the daisies as far as horseflesh could go—weary horses now that had been hard-pushed night and day.

A lot of people would be here tonight and tomorrow for the hanging of the Polka Dot Kid. Some people took a lot of enjoyment out of seeing a man drop through the trap of the old scaffold on the east side of the jail.

But not those fellas coming up the valley! They were like Indian scouts in a hostile country, strung-out so that if one man heard lead whistle the others would be far enough from him to sling like hellions into action and back the unlucky one's play. When they were still a couple of miles away Landlee arose suddenly and spur-clanked into the office of the jail, taking time to carefully close the front door and fasten it before moving on to take his keys from the drawer of the big desk to his right.

Monkey Smith and Droopy Brown, his two deputies, would be back soon. He did not have a lot of time for playing around. Unlocking the door, he walked quickly back into the corridor of the jail.

"Come out here, Kid," he growled as he fitted a key in the lock of the strongest cell in the jail. "Got somethin' I wanta show yuh. No funny business, though. I'd hate like hell to have to shoot yuh."

It was almost a youth, lean, brown-haired and blue-eyed, who stepped out into the corridor when the sheriff opened the door. The old man simply nodded toward the office, and the Kid walked on. Clean as a whistle, the Kid was, and Landlee noticed that he had another new polka dot tie of soft silk wagging at his throat. Landlee marched him on to a barred window, and stopped a few feet behind him.

"Yo've writ an awful lot of letters in the months yo've been here, Kid." His voice was usually a growl and no better now. "Look south, an' tell me what yuh see."

He was watching the Kid closely now. The Kid gripped the bars. Landlee saw him tense, saw his face go white. It was only for a moment, and the Kid was back to himself again. He turned, facing the sheriff, and there was a funny little smile on his face.

"I just see four riders, Mr. Landlee."

"Yuh ain't a born liar, Kid." Landlee smiled sourly. "Be a good fella an' let's go back now." He followed him silently, doggedly until he had locked him in, and then stood there with his gnarled old hands on the bars, voice a growl as he spoke. "I'm hatin' this, Kid. Lord knows I am. Betty would stake her last chip on yuh, an' I ain't never caught yuh in a lie—unless yuh did shoot that cow-buyer an' take his money an' hoss."

"Sheriff," the Kid thrust his hand through the bars, just as he had a thousand times, "I may die tomorrow. It's in the cards. Up there on the scaffold I'll tell you as the last word that I know no more about that killing than you know."

"It ain't Betty who makes yuh say that?"

"No, not Betty." The Kid grinned. "I might tell a million lies to somebody else. I couldn't lie to her. She's too fine for that. If I were guilty she would forgive me. She's that good."

"That's a mighty purty tie yo're wearin'," growled the sheriff, turning away. "Anything yuh want down the street? Droopy an' Monkey will be back in a few minutes."

"Not a thing, thanks, Mr. Landlee," said the Kid.

It was damn' hard to hang a boy like that, and Landlee's face was as bitter as gall when he relocked the corridor door and put the keys in the drawer. For a moment he stood there, hands on his hips and staring at the dodgers on the wall. The only quick, unruly thing the Polka Dot Kid had ever done was to tear a couple of those dodgers off the wall one day, but one of the pictures was still in Hoss Landlee's mind. There were some things he just did not forget.

Hoss Landlee was standing on the porch with his hands planted on his hips when Monkey Smith and Droopy Brown came up the street. Brown was a red-mouthed redhead and Smith was dark. Two big, badge-flashing, pistol-swaggering fellas, each with a red rum spout for a nose.

The first of the four riders from southward was just clattering into the foot of the street. The other three were scattering, one going to pull up at the depot, the others behind the saloons. Smooth work, no signals, each just knowing what to do. Smith and Brown had not even noticed them.

"Just had a look-in on the Kid," he told them, "but take yore own standin' order look-in on 'im as usual. Think I'll drift down the street an' get me a tall glass of coolin' beer. Betty had a mite too much salt in the gravy."

He had slipped off his old star, dropping it in his vest pocket. For some reason he was never going to get used to wearing one of them damn' things to tell everybody in sight he was *the law*! Lazily now he sauntered on, stopping for a few moments to gander in at a new saddle in Pooley Sharp's general store. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the first rider swing down at the hitchrack in front of Buck Bullard's Mountain Lion saloon.

Landlee strolled into the saloon a short time behind his man. It was as he had expected to find it. There were a few cowboys bellied up to the front of the bar. The stranger had stopped at the head of it. Down at the foot of the bar a second stranger had dropped in, showing no sign that he knew the other one. The other two would probably be down the street in Moon Tucker's Wise Owl. One would not see those four monkeys drinking in the same saloon. They had too much savvy for that.

As he sipped his beer and his eyes grew accustomed to the shadows Landlee had a fair chance to study the two men. The rooster at the foot of the bar was old, lean and hard. His hair and wide-sweeping mustaches that looked like the spread on a Texas longhorn were jet-black, showing that he had dyed them. Harmless looking duck, yet a tough old buzzard sipping at a water glass half-filled

with straight 100-proof-whiskey—the kind Bullard always served when he was trying to put the devil down. Under that bird's long-tailed coat would be a couple of .45's—and the gnarled hands and the keen hawk-eyes in that old face would be the kind to know how to use them.

The other rooster slowly going for a light bottle of beer was about thirty-five, lean and hard too. Landlee could not get the best squint in the world at him under the fella's wide-brimmed black hat, but he knew a fighting face even in the shadows. Taking his time and stalling, he ordered another glass of beer. He had just about finished it when he heard somebody yelling his head off outside.

It came then, the devil to pay without a lot of waiting for it. A long-legged, freckle-faced youth of fourteen just about tore the bat-winged red flaps out of the front door as he came hurling inside, his eyes popping like buttons, all out of breath and skidding to a one-sided halt in the sawdust on the floor.

"Mr. Landlee!" he yelled. "Mr. Landlee, a turrible thing's done happened up yonder at the jail! Miss Betty Landlee come downstairs an' throwed a gun on Mr. Smith an' Mr. Brown! She made 'em go back in the jail an' let the Polka Dot Kid go plum free! Together they locked up Mr. Smith an' Mr. Brown, an' they're just about to cuss an' kick the walls down! They say the Polka Dot Kid's done taken the best saddle hoss in the corral out back an' is—is fannin' it like sixty up the canyon!"

CHAPTER TWO

Jailed

THE gathering of the crowd was the fastest and most amazing thing Hoss Landlee had seen for many a day. There were scads of folks in town, he knew, but they more than filled the street now. The news had spread. Men, women and kids poured down from the mess of bird houses on the west slope. Before Landlee could get to the jail a milling and grumbling mob was there ahead of him, jamming into the office and ganging up around the windows.

Betty Landlee sat behind the desk,

garbed in gray-and-white-checked ging-ham starched so stiff it rattled like wind in a canebrake. She was tall, dark-haired and blue-eyed—as quiet as the dog-goned mouse that had just swiped the cat's milk. Hoss Landlee simply had to stop and stare at her with his mouth open and his store-bought teeth about to fall out.

She was not a danged bit excited, sitting there like a cool gambler who had just shoved in a staggering pile of chips and was waiting for the other fella to call the play or quit cold.

It was not like that at all inside the jail. Monkey Smith and Droopy Brown had torn an iron-railed bunk off its hinges and were pounding the wall—wild men they were, plum hog-wild and cursing loud enough to be heard all over town.

"Yuh—Yuh done it?" Landlee demanded of his granddaughter, finding his voice at last. "Let 'im go?"

"I let him go, Granpa." She nodded, had even the nerve to half-smile at him. "It was the only decent thing to do."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Landlee spoke whisperingly and plucked at the loose and wrinkled skin of his throat. "Yuh might know yo've rammed yore head in a hornet's nest. Where's them keys?"

Without a word she tossed them to him. He caught them, staring at them foolishly for a moment, and then turned to the corridor door. It had grown so confounded still in the room a fella could almost hear the heart-beats around him. Smith and Brown had even quit cursing like drunken fools for a moment. They started up again when he rattled the key in the lock and swung open the door.

Brown and Smith were slobbering like mad dogs, and they were cursing again at the tops of their voices when he unlocked the door. In spite of all that, knowing them for bullies who always howled like hyenas when things were going against them, he did not expect the rush that followed.

"Yuh was in on it, damn yuh!" Brown was at the door. With a furious lunge he sent it flying open, four hundred pounds of swinging steel that caught the old man up and down the body, hurling him across the corridor and slapping him against the opposite wall.

Landlee went down, addled by the blow,

not knowing just where he was or what had happened to him. Brown snatched up the heavy keys and raced on to the office of the jail.

"There she is!" he roared, wheeling now toward the desk and swinging up the keys, a man so mad he would have killed his own mother at the moment. "I'll bat yore head in—"

The girl had leaped back, a six-shooter flying into her hand from somewhere—but she never had a chance to use it. A Colt thundered from the front wall of the room to her left, its hot shaft of sudden fire a streak of red lightning. The keys flew out of Brown's upraised hand, the blood squirting. A fool who did not know when he was licked. Brown flung his left hand toward the gun-locker on the wall.

Again the Colt thundered from a tall man's hand who stood there with a cigarette drooping in the left side of his mouth, two bleak slits for eyes that were frosty-gray and merciless under the wide-sweeping brim of a black hat.

Twice, three times now the whole jail seemed to shake, the gunsmoke rising, the acrid bite filling the room. Brown's left hand dropped, the blood squirting from the fingers, the wrist and another hole halfway to the elbow. He staggered back, let out a yell of horror and pain, and started slow-slumping down against the wall—the cold eyes of the stranger watching him. No part of the stranger had seemed to move except the thumb and trigger finger of that lightning gun-hand. He spoke now, voice hellishly quiet:

"I sometimes nail coffin lids down with a forty-five, mister. . . . He won't be able to hit you now, ma'am." Then he was gone like something fading into the crowd.

Brown was sobbing now, his fit of cursing knocked out of him. Landlee had come out of the most of his daze and blundered to the corridor doorway. Monkey Smith was just ahead of him, standing there frozen stiff in his tracks with his hands up and his mouth so wide-open he looked like a fool inviting every fly in town to come right on in. Landlee reached out his arm and pawed Smith's hands down.

"Ain't nobody," he growled thickly, "holdin' a gun on yuh, Monkey. What

—what happened?" He stared at Brown. "I'm shot!" howled Brown. "Both hands busted to hell. . . . Look at the blood!"

"An' who—" hooted the sheriff, rubbing his half-limp left hand across his face—"shot yuh? Seems like I did hear a gun. Yeah, but either yuh or Monkey had knocked me down with that damn door, Droopy. Yeah!" He pawed at his face again, then glared around the room. "I remember now. Clear out some of this crowd, Monkey. A man can't breathe in a dad-blamed jam like this. Clear out, folks!"



"LOOKS like a bad job on your hands, Landlee." A tall thin man of sixty-two had stepped forward with a walking cane. His face under a wide hard-brimmed straw hat with a ridiculously low crown was about the color of pumpkin. He wore white shoes, a white silk shirt and tie, and a blue serge coat—a lean, hawkish man, the dude of Peace City who sported a diamond on his left hand as large as a dime and always smoked the longest, fattest gold-danged cigars Hoss Landlee had ever seen. "I'll draw up a warrant for your granddaughter."

"Swanky Dan Shrack on the job!" growled Landlee, rubbing his face again. "Door musta hurt me worse'n I thought or I mighta smelled that cheap perfume yuh wear. Head hit the wall, I guess. Which one of yuh was it that pushed, Monkey?"

"Droopy done it." He nodded at the sobbing thing against the wall. "We'd better get 'im outa here an' down to Doc Ridley's or he's gonna bleed to death. Get up, Brown, an' let's get goin'. Gimme a hand, somebody. His legs ain't hurt, I reckon."

Landlee watched them take Brown out, then Swanky Dan Shrack's voice was drumming in his ears again:

"You will place Miss Landlee under arrest. Then—as prosecuting attorney of Peace City—I order you to go get the man who shot Brown."

"An' why arrest that fella?" Another voice was jarring into it now. A six-foot,

bull-necked old codger had stepped forward, sand-colored mustaches drooping like an extra-big horseshoe around his mouth. It was old Tightwad Booth, owner of the Broken Arrow outfit on Wild Wind Mesa to eastward, and a man who controlled every vote in that direction. "Hell, all the fella done was to keep that gal from gettin' hit over the head an' her skull busted with them heavy keys. Either that or she woulda shot 'im. He was so blind mad he couldn't see the gal's gun. An' if yuh want the whole damn truth, yuh yaller monkey with a walkin' stick, my forty-five was just clearin' the top of the holster when that dude started blazin'."

"All yuh want is to make a case, Shrack." Landlee strode forward, danger in his mean old eyes now. "Don't make no difference if it sticks in court or not. Make a case agin a fella, haul 'im in, and' he'll have to pay some other lawyer rooster to defend him. I've hung seven men for yuh an' yore picked professional jurymen since I've been sheriff here, an' I'm gettin' tired—damned tired, you yellow-livered skunk!"

Landlee started pecking Shrack on the chest with his forefinger. "All I do is protect yuh an' yore kind. Every day yuh live yo're thinkin' an' schemin' up somethin' new on the people who put yuh in office. Now get out before I take yuh by yore lawyer ears—an' throw yuh to hell out! Get goin'!"

"I'll impeach you for this!" cried Shrack as he backed away in the crowd. "I've intended to do it for months—"

"Better keep movin', pumpkin face," cut in Tightwad Booth. "Hoss has his fire kindled. If he starts on yuh he'll stomp yore head off—an' I'm damned if me an' my Broken Arrow boys won't hold back the crowd if we have to pour lead in ever'body's belly in town!"

"I reckon, Betty," Landlee was moving on to the girl, "yo're under arrest. Jobs like yo've done call for jailin' people, an' that's what it's gonna be—"

"She's in jail, Hoss," shot in Tightwad, "if yuh know the nose on yore own ugly damn face, as long as she's under this roof."

"That was just what I was gonna say," Landlee grinned. "Get upstairs, Betty,

an' back to yore housework. I reckon I'll go down to the telegraph office an' try to head off the Kid the best I can. I'll send Monkey back to clean up this blood."

CHAPTER THREE

Wolf of the Cimarron

MANY pairs of eyes glowered at Hoss Landlee as he walked down the street, not giving a blasted damn about anybody. He headed straight on for the depot. The overgrown tub of hog lard there who everybody called Tiny Tarlow was no friend of his except in a sort of a sneer-smile way. Sometimes they did not as much as nod at each other for a week.

Landlee only grunted now, and did not notice whether Tarlow grunted back or not. He wrote out his telegrams and handed them across. When he walked outside the man who had shot Brown was standing there leaning against the corner of the boxcar. The cold-eyed stranger had a brown cigarette in the side of his mouth, feet crossed lazily and his thumbs hooked over the buckles of his broad belts.

"Best thing yuh can do is get outa town," growled Landlee. "No, I didn't see the shootin'. I was back there with the devil knocked outa me by a door—but I did see yuh fade out in the crowd shufflin' shells in yore gun. Brown an' Smith are my deppities—saddled on me, yuh might say. I don't like 'em, they don't like me. But they've got friends—an' there's plenty of 'em who ain't above droppin' a ball in yore back."

"You figure on getting the Kid with those telegrams, do you?" The stranger flicked him a glance up and down.

"Sendin' wires is about all I can do." Landlee put his hands on his hips, straightened like a stretching gander, and looked up the street. "He took my Midnight hoss. Cost me three hundred dollars, that hoss. Fastest thing in the country, an' the Kid had plenty of getaway country at every hand before he was up the canyon a mile. To start out behind an' try to find him, would be like divin' for a penny in the middle of the biggest ocean in the world."

"You don't go on plain man-trailing, then?"

"In some country, yeah, in some, no. It's mostly good in books yuh read, an' that's about all, mister. What'd yuh say yore name was?"

"I didn't say." The hint of a smile wiggled its way across the stranger's face. "Don't recall asking yours, either."

"The Kid never told me his real name." Landlee slid his hands back over his kidneys and stretched again. "Allus stuck to Polka Dot Kid, the monicker of ol' Tightwad Booth give him when he hit here. Booth an' his whole crowd liked him, swore for him in court. He sticks to a man when he sticks. I've had a sneakin' feelin' all along that the Broken Arrow boys might make a play to take the Kid off my hands at the last minute."

"It's odd, the jobs some men turn to." The stranger's smile was a cruel little crook now. "I wonder if you ever heard of a fellow they used to call the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron?"

"The—er—who—?"

"You're related to an owl, I take it?" The stranger's crooked little grin widened. "Quite a fellow, the Lone Wolf was—they say. His last job was the Katy Flier one midnight at Lonesome Bend about fifteen years ago. Always the lone wolf on every job. The people up there in northern New Mexico were crazy about him; a sort of a Robin Hood, they say. Always hated the common thieves. Believed in taking his over the shining barrels. No one ever knew another name for him—that is, knew it and would tell it.

The stranger's grin faded as he went on: "One day he heard that his son and his son's wife had been killed in some kind of an accident and had left a little girl behind. He tossed a sack of gold in a poor Mexican's lap and rode away that night, and it was the last of the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron. I reckon," the stranger's voice changed, "yo're still listenin', ain't yuh, Pop?"

"Why—why, yeah." Hoss Landlee was looking straight across the street, lips white, every nerve in his body trembling. By a great effort he kept his voice steady. "That was quite a story, mister. The Wolf of the Cimarron musta loved the little

one an' decided to hit it straight. But I can tell yuh this, an' yuh can stack yore last damned chip in the pile on it." He turned, burning fire in his old eyes as he looked the stranger squarely in the face. "If anybody, anywhere, at anytime ever told the little gal, then, by the good Lawd, he'd hear the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron howl—an' never live to tell agin!"

"Don't worry, Pop." The stranger laughed. "I never throw knives in the dark. I'm Texas Charley Wade. There are as many rewards on my head as yours. I'm here only to see that the Polka Dot Kid doesn't hang. He never stole a horse or anything else in his life. He's as straight as they come—about the only straight one outside of my mother in the whole damned family. I'd kill the man who would have him otherwise. You see, Cimarron, he's my kid brother. His first name's Dave."

"Be shore yuh stick only to the Kid in this town," warned the sheriff, voice cold and steady again. "I ain't havin' that bank across the street robbed by yuh or nobody else. I used to have a couple of pictures of yuh nailed on my wall. The Kid tore 'em down. But watch yore step, I say. That's straight talk. Yuh *sabe* straight talk, I reckon, Mr. Wade?"

Wade nodded, and Hoss Landlee turned and walked away, face long and gray, old shoulders squared. Real trouble had a way of making his face hard. It looked now as if someone had removed the skin and replaced it with cold, white marble.

He was just about to pass the Rock & Rye Bar when a bellow of oaths and a rush of booted feet came to him. The green batwings of the Rock & Rye flew open a second later as if a cannon ball had struck them. Coming headfirst, all arms and legs, was a six-foot buckaroo; a dark-bearded giant in black chaps and a flaming red shirt. Hatless, blood pouring from his mouth, he hit the graveled walk on his nose, slid a yard before he stopped. Slowly he got to his hands and knees as the hard face of old Tightwad Booth looked out over the batwings for a second, then turned away.

Big Ike Beverly, one of the well-known trigger men for old Nance Yardley of the Ace of Spades to westward, was in

trouble again. And this time with one of the most dangerous characters he could find to pick it with. Landlee turned and started across the street, a scowl on his face, Texas Charley Wade forgotten for the moment.

Every dad-blasted time Big Ike came to town of late he would get into something and just make a man lock him up. Bud Crow, his running mate, a fire-ball redhead who was just as big and just as nasty when drinking, would be around somewhere and ready to poke his nose into it.

Hoss Landlee had no intention of arresting Big Ike this time. He was just going to collar him and tell him to hit saddle leather and get the hell out of town. But Big Ike had other ideas. The glint of the star on the sheriff's vest must have been like the wave of a red flag to a mad bull's eye. With a string of oaths snarling from the side of his mouth he came up, hands going for his guns.

"I ain't goin' to no jail!" he yelled. "Damn yuh, Hoss Landlee, I'm shootin' my way outa this—"

"Wait, yuh fool!" bawled the sheriff.

He was slow today, slow to think and act after that talk with Texas Charley Wade. Hoss Landlee went for his guns almost an instant too late. It would have been entirely too late if Big Ike's aim had not wavered.

Big Ike had opened fire—the crazy damn' fool! His first bullet punched a hole through Landlee's hat just above the left ear. The second ball crossed the sheriff's right shoulder—and then the old man was in action with streams of fire gushing from both hands. He tore Big Ike off his feet, six slugs of lead ripping through him, and spun him around, dropping him flat on his face on the sidewalk with all the worldly damnation completely and forever shot to hell an' gone out of him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead and Cold Feet

IT WAS the beginning of a real run of hard luck. Big Ike Beverly and Bud Crow had ridden for old Tightwad Booth for a few months when they

first showed up in these parts four years ago. Tightwad had caught them running his Broken Arrow brand on a neighbor's yearling. No cowboy rustled for Tightwad Booth, and the old man had kicked them both off the ranch, making bad blood between them ever since.

As the crowd came rushing up, Tightwad stepped outside through the batwings with Broken Arrow men sidling away from him to quietly lean against the wall. Others would be inside, guarding the old man's back. Men who rode for Tightwad Booth would go to hell for him.

"Yep, I reckon I started it, Hoss." Tightwad was trying to explain in his gruff old way. "I hit him in his nasty mouth with a bottle of beer an' throwed him through the door. The beer bottle was the first come-handy. I oughta shot him an' saved yuh the trouble. He started runnin' off at the mouth about Betty lettin' the Polka Dot Kid—"

A shot thundered at that moment, cutting him off and making Landlee wheel. The roar had come from Texas Charley Wade, still leaning cross-legged against the corner of the depot, sixgun now in his hand just about belt-high.

A yell, half-drowned by the shot, had come from an upstairs porch down the street in front of the hotel. Up there wheeling to flee was redheaded Bud Crow who had tried to take a sneak shot at Tightwad from the sidelines. Wade had fired only one shot, shooting the six-shooter out of Crow's hand at a distance of almost seventy paces.

Having made his play and failed, it was the end of Crow for the time being. Broken Arrow men went surging back through the Rock & Rye in a cursing dash to try to cut him off, but Crow and Beverly had left their Ace of Spade horses below the hotel. Before the Broken Arrow men could get a chance to open up on him Crow was in his saddle, burning leather out of town as fast as his horse could go.

"Who shot him!" Swanky Dan Shrack was on the job again, that cock-eyed straw cage tilted on the side of his head, walking stick under his arm. "Oh, Landlee, eh!" His eyes widened when somebody told him. "You're a little too handy with

your guns of late, Landlee. This town is just about getting enough—"

Hoss Landlee had not said a word. For years now he had been wanting to bust that yellow mouth. He hit suddenly, just like a mule kicking. The blow caught Shrack squarely, a smashing, terrible punch right on the nose and lips. Shrack went backward, heels overhead, knocked colder than a frosty morning.

"Somebody who votes for it an' its kind," growled the sheriff, "can drag it off an' throw a bucket of water on it. I may be impeached as he's allus threatenin', but it'll be doin' me a favor. Here, Squinty," he glowered at a little goose-necked man, "get some of yore Ace of Spade bunch an' get Beverly's body outa town. The county only allows me eight dollars a head to bury 'em, an' I can't buy a box big enough for Beverly for eight dollars. Nance Yardley maybe wants to give him a big funeral, countin' all the calves an' yearlin's he's stole for him."

He turned and walked over to his office and sat on the porch. One of these days people were going to keep on until they really made him mad—and then, by jingo, he'd take a couple of rifles and a few shotguns and just shoot the whole danged town off the map!

He could hear Betty upstairs, hard heels pecking about on the floor of the kitchen. There would be corned beef and cabbage for supper—he hoped. Then he saw Swanky Dan Shrack coming up the street, followed by a couple of Ace of Spade plug-uglies.

The plug-uglies found that they had some right urgent business in Pooley Sharp's big store—when one of them glanced back and saw Tightwad Booth and four Broken Arrow men coming up the street behind them. That left it for Shrack to come on alone.

Landlee was sitting there twiddling his thumbs when the prosecutor walked up. It was almost enough to knock a man over when Shrack thrust out his hand.

"My apology, Landlee." Shrack even tried to smile, then quickly clamped a handkerchief to his broken and swollen mouth to finish what he had to say through that. "I've been your friend all along, but you're not the kind to admit it."

"Yuh can put yore hand in yore pocket." The sheriff frowned. "I allus did feel sorter like I was takin' holt of the paw of a dog with a right bad case of the mange when I shook hands with yuh, Mr. Shrack."

"Then," Shrack tried to snarl, but the broken mouth prevented it, "you don't have any intention of burying the hatch-et!"

"Nope." Landlee glanced down the street to see that Booth and his crowd had stopped to lean against the wall just above Sharp's store. "Nary one intention. I don't like yuh. Hate yore guts, yore liver an' lights. Yo're a plain damned thief, inside an' out. Yo're what they call a sadist, Shrack. Yuh love to see the other fella in trouble, love to stand howlin' like a damned hyena in a courtroom, knowin' me an' Monkey an' Droopy are there to protect yuh. I don't think much of law an' yore kind, Mr. Shrack. Yuh make it a game—"

"I've known for some time, Landlee, how you feel." Shrack leaned closer. "Of course you wouldn't like law and order!

I'm fully aware of a lot of things that might surprise you. It might even make you want your feet held to the fire—to cure cold feet, as the roughnecks say around these parts. Tell me something: Did you ever hear of the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron, Mr. Landlee?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Colt Talk

"SEEMS like I heard that name somewhere." Hoss Landlee had had his ears pinned back once today. He was not going to be caught a second time and sit there gagging and looking like a fool. He was as cool as an old hog on ice. He turned his head, casually watching a big gang of riders coming like a storm cloud blowing toward Peace City. That bunch, he frowned, would make trouble, he'd bet. Suddenly he looked back at Shrack. "Why yuh askin', pumpkin face?"

"I've said that I knew for some time how you felt about law." Shrack took the

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liberty of pulling up a chair and jack-knifing himself into it. "I find that a lot of people are outlaws under the skin, and you've never exactly taken to the game. Yes, I said game. All life's a game. Two thirds of the people of the earth are born to eat off the rest, like the fleas on a dog's back if you want to put it that way." He tried to grin. "I didn't know about the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron except in a far-fetched way that had no connection to you—until about twenty minutes ago. Nancy Yardley was in the Wise Owl when you killed Big Ike Beverly.

"Big Ike knew that he was going to kill you or you would kill him the next time you tried to arrest him. He was born in the Cimarron River country, and was wanted down there for killing a couple of men while trying to rob a bank a couple of years before he showed up here. Fifteen or sixteen years ago he saw the Lone Wolf around a Mexican village a number of times. Just to get square with you, even after he was dead, he wrote a letter and turned it over to Nance with orders to hand me that letter in case the worst happened to him. I have it here along with Big Ike's picture on a sheriff's dodger. I'd say things are pretty *damned damning*—in case I want to use it."

"Go on," nodded Landlee, gently, "yuh ain't half-finished yet."

"From now on, Landlee," Shrack slow-pounded his fist on the rail, "you're my meat, my pig in a poke, butchered and salted down. From now on you'll take orders from me. You have a lot of friends here, and they're not particularly my friends. No one else knows what I know. They won't—unless you try to get out of hand. You're still listening, I take it?"

"Way ahead," Landlee again nodded. "At the next election yuh wanta see yoreself judge of this district. Bill Tupper's been judge nearabout thirty years, they say. He's kinda well-liked, but of course he thinks he owns the office by this time an' will have his nose in the public feed-trough until he dies—an' then maybe can sorter will the job to his son Benny. He can be beat, but why the hell anybody'd want to elect a prosecutor a judge is more'n I know. A prosecutor never forgets he's a prosecutor."

"You under-rate me, Landlee." It looked like Shrack was trying to sneer in his face. "I'm never out for the chicken-feed when there's big game in the bushes. For the past four years old Snead Pawling down yonder in the bank has been running for governor of this State. Yes, quietly spending a fortune, and this fall he's going through—and win! I'm shooting for the job of state attorney."

"Lawyers will shore get fat then!"

"And after I'm state attorney one term, Landlee," Shrack's eyes were bright, "I'm going to be the governor! You're going to help me. The first order I can think of right now is for you to throw that man in jail, the one who shot Brown. And you're going to stick your granddaughter down here *in jail* just like any other criminal and not have her running about upstairs."

Landlee grinned. "Yo're a heap bigger fool than I thought. If I'm to help yuh like yuh say, then I'd better hang on to what votes I can. If I put that fella an' Betty in jail, it'll make Tightwad Booth know somethin's wrong. He'll get mad, an' when Booth gets mad ever' damn man on Wild Wind Mesa gets mad with him. Yuh better go down to Doc Riley's an' let him fix yore face. It's sorter affectin' the brain, I reckon. Yuh wanta win votes, not lose 'em, yuh damned fool, if yuh really do aim to be governor."

Outwardly he was still thoroughly cool and quiet when Shrack took himself down the street, and yet Hoss Landlee's head was in a whirl. He was in a right sizable pickle here. All along he had known that Big Ike Beverly was wanted in New Mexico. He had burned up a couple of dodgers on him because he didn't want any dad-burned New Mexico sheriff running up here. Even a friend of the past might not be a friend any more if he'd once got his nose into politics. Politics made most men plain gut-hungry.

Landlee went into his office.

"What did *he* want?" Betty's voice startled him from the doorway leading into the boxed-in stairway. "No, I didn't intend to be eavesdropping, Granpa. I saw him coming and heard you quarreling. Look here, now." She came on, slipping her left arm through his. "I

know I'm in trouble, but I'm not sorry. I know you're not angry with me. The Kid was innocent, framed to the gal-lows by the Nance Yardley crowd. Oh, Granpa," she stepped back and clasped her hands desperately, "let's give up all this and leave here. You've said a thou-and times that you were never cut out for a sheriff—"

"Yuh go on back about yore job," he growled, patting her shoulder. "I reckon I never was cut out for a sheriff, but it seems I've got some real work to do now."



HE ARGUED with her for a few minutes, asked about a dozen questions, and then turned away abruptly. Just to get away from her, wondering how much she had heard from the stairway, he walked out the front door and turned around behind the jail, passing the old hangman's scaffold. He had thought he had heard a wagon come up back there, and he saw the gray heads of two old horses showing around the northeast corner of the little barn.

Pedro Gonzales, a pock-pitted little old Mexican from a couple of miles up the canyon, had brought him another load of his good wild hay and was putting it in the loft of the barn. People who had hay to sell at a cheaper price always wondered why Hoss Landlee so consistently bought everything he could from Gonzales. Often they were seen together, sitting quietly away from everybody else and talking in low voices and generally in Spanish.

Sometimes people heard them laugh and could only wonder what they saw in each other that was funny. Not even the smart-aleck Big Ike Beverly had ever suspected that Pedro Gonzales had gone along a number of times to hold the horses in the bushes when the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron was making history sing in the Southwest.

Gonzales had just tossed his last forkful of hay in the end door of the loft. He dropped down out of the wagon now beside his old friend and stood there as still as a post while Landlee talked to him in a low voice. He scowled from time to time,

his little, beady-black eyes narrowing.

"But that should be an easy matter, *Señor*." He spoke in Spanish at last, voice a growl. "When a dog barks too loudly, then a gun or a good knife will still the bark. Look, each morning at ten he goes to the barber shop below the Wise Owl to get all shaved and made pretty and smelling so loud you can hear him coming a mile away. I can quietly step in, make him swallow the muzzle of my six-shooter, and start shooting until the gun is empty. With six bullets in the head—"

"Then yuh would have to take it outa here on the run," said Landlee. "Any ol' time yuh shoot a tinhorn politician it makes him a martyr. I've got a better idea. Go home, get dressed up, an' get back here to the jail in time to take the ten o'clock southbound tonight. I'll have some things ready for yuh an' five hundred dollars to foot yore bills. Yo're gonna take a quiet trip down to New Mexico."

"No, *Señor*!" Pedro's eyes grew large and round. "Surely you would not tell me such bad things at one moment and such a good thing at the next. There is my old father and mother, both ninety-seven. I would see them and all my good friends. *Sí, sí*, and my brother-in-law has been elected to the big job of catching all the stray dogs in his town! And you have friends down there—I would see them all!"

"Get travelin'," growled Landlee. "I'm out to fool hell outa a fella, an' I'm figurin' on a heap of things from them friends I've got in that country. *Scat*, yuh runt! Yuh ain't got time to waste. Daylight's a-burnin' an' nightfall's a-comin'."

He was slow-grinning and even humming a little tune as he turned, heading back for the jail. Ideas came quick to him, he reckoned. This was going to be the damndest one that ever jumped up and slapped swanky Dan Shrack squarely in the face. Yes, sir, it would just about bust the head of the banjo and—"

Thoughts along that line were suddenly cut short. He was almost under the old scaffold on the east sid of the jail again when the noise came rolling up to him. At first it was a wild yelling, quickly followed by the heavy thunder of a .45 letting go. He knew dangd well it was

a Colt. A Smith & Wesson made a keener report. It took a Colt ever'time to just come right out and thunder!

It was that devilish gang he had seen riding in when he was talking to Shrack. The Wild Bunch, they called 'emselfs, a mixture of all the lowdown scalawags from the half-dozen little ranches to southward. They always came in on the rush, loaded to the gills on their own particular brand of moonshine whiskey and looking to start something right off the dad-burned bat.

Any trifling excuse to fight was enough for them. They were against the Polka Dot Kid to a man, and simply because old Tightwad Booth and his crowd liked him. Had Booth been against him they would have started trouble by pitching a wild celebration and trying to run the fighting old cowman and his gang out of town.

But it had not started out with Booth or Broken Arrow cowboys this time. They had heard the news of the Kid's escape at the blacksmith shop at the foot of the street. One of the three men who had ridden into town behind Texas Charley Wade was getting old Flip Cooper to shoe his horse.

Just for the hell of it six of those fools had started squalling like wildcats while the others rode on. Two of the Clausson boys in the party must not have liked the looks of the stranger's horse. Only a few weeks ago they had run old Flip out of his shop and were just about to set the place afire when Hoss Landlee got there to bat them over their mean heads with his big .45's and throw them both smack into jail.

Buck Clausson had fired the first shot under the stranger's horse. Bob had fired then, shooting twice. It had been the signal for hell to burst loose. The stranger had ducked, weaved, a spry fellow coming up shooting with both hands. Both the Claussons were knocked out of their saddles before the devil could scorch a feather.

Then the four others who had stopped were going for their guns. The stranger was an accommodating cuss, blowing them out of their saddles as fast as he could whip triggers—while the two Claussons, not dead for a few moments, were pouring lead into him as they were dying on the ground.

IT WAS the worst mess Peace City had seen in many a day when Hoss Landlee got there on the gallop after stopping in the office of the jail just long enough to seize an old 10-gauge pump-gun he had sawed down. A horse had whirled, a dying man's foot caught with its spur hooked under the cinch. Away went the horse, a gang of the drunken Wild Bunch after it.

The others were swinging back now, cursing and yelling. Seven men were either dead or dying in just about as many seconds, and before he knew it Landlee found himself in a fight with two big monkeys. An old tiger suddenly attacked, he smashed one big bruiser down over the head with the butt of the shotgun, hitting him just like killing a bull with a maul.

Then he knocked half the face off the other, and started backing away, hunting fighting room and a place to get his back against the wall. He had landed against the wall of a little harness and saddle shop when the whole street seemed to jump into a free-for-all fight with nobody asking quarter or how the fighting was to be done.

It was Hoss Landlee's chance to try out the shotgun and the special shells he had loaded for it. As a swarm of men came tearing toward him across the hotel porch, he let drive, firing straight into the mob, belly-high. The wide-spreading charge staggered back almost a dozen men, sending half of them sprawling and crying out as if they had been struck with forty cannon balls.

He swung and let drive into another mob in the street. He was a quick old coot about it, and he kept shooting, shuffling extra shells into the gun as fast as he was firing it. Mobs of men were going down, some of them dropping like rocks, white-faced and still as they struck the ground.

He let drive at a burly Ace of Spader, hitting him from forty feet squarely up and down the neck and across the shoulders with the full charge. That worthy simply threw up his hands and pitched face-forward in the dust without a whimper coming out of him.

It was like the devil letting loose to kill everybody in sight. In a street fight a

shotgun was always a terror. Nobody noticed what was happening each time he fired, but each time the old gun let go its charge the air around where it struck was filled with flying white particles showering in all directions.

Before Hoss Landlee had things under control there were thirty-three men down in the street, some of them out cold, others moaning that they were shot to pieces. Within thirty minutes after he had ceased shooting he had the jail jammed full, half of them with their ears knocked down, the rest terrorized into submission by that awful old shotgun.

The dead and the really wounded were carried up the street to Doc Riley's little hospital and undertaking shop above Snead Pawling's bank. Slowly, like some-

crook of his arm, a mean glint in his eye. "That ain't half I've got cooked up for yuh no-good hell-lifters."

He held them after that. Now and then he saw Texas Charley Wade, and finally Wade caught him alone for a few minutes and sidled up to speak in a low voice.

"The fellow who rode in with me, now." He spoke from the side of the mouth. "That's Joe Dart, alias the Mississippi Whip-Poor-Will. Worth ten thousand dollars in a wooden overcoat. Send a wire to the sheriff of Little Rock and he'll come for the body and bring the money."

"An' then?" growled Landlee. "Split with yuh, I reckon?"

"You'll split with his blind mother;"

William R. Cox, who has had many fine stories in this magazine, will be with us next month with a dramatically different novel of a gun-quick Gentleman from Georgia who leaves a southern jail to lend his six-shooters to the cause of Texas justice. Don't miss "Pilgrim of the Gun Storm"—in February 10 STORY WESTERN. . . . On sale January 7th!

thing coming out of a fog, the rest of the dazed and well-whipped mob started realizing what had happened.

"Slick!" Tightwad Booth laughed, voice rolling from one end of the street to the other. "Yuh gotta get up 'fore daylight to beat ol' Hoss, damn if yain't! Look at yuh monkeys who thought yuh was kilt! Yuh got bumps an' blisters all over yuh! An' some just fainted! *Haw-haw-haw!* I thought I'd stopped a Number One Buck, m'self. Hoss was shootin' beans. Beans, by dam', the ole 'thirty-eight' kind y've been eatin' off the tailboard of a chuck-wagon all these years! Only—only Hoss didn't cook 'em. He just fired 'em dry into yore pants an' bellies. *Haw-haw-haw—wowwiee!*"

"*Haw-haw!*" sneered back an Ace of Spader. "We knowed damn well he didn't have guts enough to sling real lead in such a crowd! I'm goin' back to the ranch, an' smear on some axle grease an' turpentine so I can set down agin."

"Then git a-goin'!" Landlee was back into it, the old shotgun cradled on the

intoned Wade. "I know the address. She's damned hard up."

"Funny yuh birds let him fight it out alone?" Landlee was watching him narrowly. "If he'd been a pard of mine—"

"I ain't admittin' nothin', Cimarron." That ugly slur came back into Wade's voice. "There was so much shootin' yuh just couldn't tell who was doin' all of it. We never let a pard down." He smiled. "That goes for even the Wolf of the Cimarron now. What's left of us are beginning to like you a hell of a lot, Hoss Landlee."

CHAPTER SIX

Two O'Clock Stick-up

WHEN Hoss returned to the jail he found a madhouse—the oaths and ribald songs pouring, apes in cages banging the walls and rattling the doors. Betty was upstairs with a pillow clamped to each ear, her usual way of weathering the human storms. A locked-

up gang of drunks thought they could do anything and say anything—but Hoss Landlee had a remedy for all that, one stout enough to make the most hog-eyed whiskey-head in Montana keep his dad-blamed ugly mouth shut.

He went out to the barn and called Weenie Wurst, a pet skunk. Weenie Wurst was a lady that had lived quietly in the barn for almost five years now. Never a scent from her as long as she was treated like a lady, but it was Lord help the fella who thought he could get funny with her.

At Landlee's second call she came with her tail lifted. He picked her up cautiously and carried her inside the jail. As grim as the devil he opened the corridor door, the noise coming to an end the moment he rattled a key in the lock.

"An' now yo're axin' for it," he growled, glaring up and down the two rows of cells, "an' I'm fetchin' it. Most of yuh tinhorn would-be toughs know Weenie Wurst. If yo're quiet, then she's quiet an' plum ladyish. Make up yore own minds an' do as yuh damn well please about it. I wish yuh luck."

He eased the skunk down, stepped back, and carefully closed the door. One could hear himself think now. Wearily he flopped down at his desk, a long sigh coming from him. For a few minutes it looked like he was going to sleep, then he heard one of his prisoners cautiously calling to somebody outside a west window.

"Hey, Willie, can yuh tell us what in hell yuh do to make shore a skunk stays quiet?"

"I'd keep quiet with it, Pistol." The man outside laughed. "Only I'd hold my breath an' pray like hell to sorter make shore."

Landlee grinned as he listened. Everybody knew Weenie Wurst was a fool about weenies, and the whole gang back there on the west side were trying to coax the fella outside to go down to old Sell-Yuh-My-Thumb Tucker's meat market and buy him out at ten dollars a pound if they had to pay it.

But nothing really mattered after that. It was quiet when Pedro Gonzales came an hour before the southbound was to go through. Carrying a ragged straw suitcase, Pedro looked just about right to

knock 'em all dead in New Mexico. He wore a rock-hard blue derby that pinned his ears down, a ginger-brown suit, and a big shoe-fly red tie, a peppermint candy shirt, and a pair of the biggest and ugliest sandals Hoss Landlee had ever seen. But it was all right. Landlee talked with him earnestly in a low voice until train time, and then made it a point to see that he was safely aboard the train.

It would have been downright puzzling to a lot of folks in Peace City had they known that Pedro was heading south with about fifty of Swanky Dan Shrack's old election posters in that ragged suitcase. On each of those posters was Shrack's picture.

Never in the history of the West did a sheriff have a more orderly gang in jail. They were so quiet and gentlemanly back there now they were like prim-faced Sunday school teachers. Hoss Landlee never passed a more peaceful night upstairs in bed. When the morning sun arose there was no kicking about the high bail he set when cattlemen came to get their mean yaps out of jail.

Landlee simply let them go inside to talk to their cowboys and bronc-twisters. Weenie Wurst greeted them as a perfect lady except for that uplifted tail. White-faced, they came out, paid over the bond, and took their monkeys home with them.

"An' Weenie Wurst," he had warned them all, "will be right here to greet all comers from now on, an' yuh might pass the word that I think she's goin' to have a litter of kittens."

"Yuh oughta be arrested!" Only old Nance Yardley had tried to start a row. "Yuh oughta be throwed in jail for mayhem an' assault an' battery with a dangerous weepion. The law ain't got no right to put a man's life in jeopardy. If that thing had let loose I'd have to bury ever' damn one of these fellas for a week an' just leave the nose stickin' out until the ground sucked the stink outa 'em."

"Yuh said yuh wanted to take these fellas back to work." Landlee had pointed his finger right up under his nose. "Get a-goin' an' raise no' ruction as yuh go. Yo'll get the worst of it if yuh do, 'cause I've still got an old charge or two I can throw yuh in jail on, an' this time if I have to lock yuh up yuh won't get no bail

'til the judge, himself, comes an' settles it. Yuh gon' home or stayin' in town?"

Nance Yardley had gone home without any more argument, and Hoss Landlee could scarcely believe the quiet he found himself in for the next two weeks. Monkey Smith and his gang had come back the fourth day, empty-handed as usual and some of the brag and strut taken out of him.

Not a word was heard from the Polka Dot Kid, but Texas Charley Wade and his two pards were still hanging around town and getting mighty chummy with Tightwad Booth and his crowd, and Droopy Brown's hands were getting well enough to fight again. In the meanwhile the sheriff from Little Rock had shown up, glad enough to pay for the body of the Mississippi Whip-Poor-Will and take it away.

It looked like an orderly existence had settled over Peace City and had come to stay. Even Swanky Dan Shrack was keeping his mouth shut for a change, but Hoss Landlee knew he was sitting on a powder keg with the burning fuse getting closer and closer to the point where the explosion was going to burst the country wide open.



THE end of the quiet arrived suddenly, striking on Saturday morning just after daylight when Monkey Smith came rushing in from the barn and Hoss Landlee learned that the Polka Dot Kid had paid Peace City a visit during the dark hours between midnight and dawn to return the prized black horse to his stable.

"But it still don't say that the Kid returned him," growled Landlee when he went out to look at Midnight. "Somebody else mighta brought him back, sound as a dollar. The Kid was the kind who would do that—"

"Sure!" sneered Smith. "Honest as the day was long, never did anything more than kill a man for his money and take his hoss!"

"Yo're a dirty damned liar, Monkey!" Hoss Landlee stepped back, every muscle tense. "Go for yore gun an' let's me an' yuh get it over right out here in the peace an' quiet of this barn. I wanta kill yuh,

Monkey, an' feel I'm kinda foolish for delayin' it. All yo're waitin' for is the right time an' place for my death to do yuh the most good, then yuh aim to drop a bullet in my back. That's a fact, yeah. Yo're the lowest-down hunk of dog-meat I've ever had to run with—"

"I'm not goin' to fight yuh this mornin', Hoss." Monkey Smith grinned at him and lifted his hands. "No, sir, not today, I ain't. There's bigger an' better ways of gettin' even with a man besides just shootin' it out with 'im. An' anyhow, yuh know damned well yuh would beat me. A fella just don't beat yuh on the draw eye to eye. The only man who'll kill yuh will just have to get his drop an' shoot yuh from behind.

"But I'm sayin' the Kid brought Midnight back. Take a look at that!" He pointed to boot-tracks in the dust. "Little feet an' little heels. I never saw anybody with such damn little feet. The Kid was back last night, right under yore nose—*whether yuh knowed it or no*. For all I know yore gran'daughter mighta met 'im out here in the dark— Oh, Hoss!"

Hoss Landlee had moved, gnarled maul of a fist coming up. It caught the big deputy on the point of the chin, lifting him, stretching him up against the wall, then a left hook swept in, ripping him across the mouth. Smith went down but not out. Like a leaping bullfrog he came up, dodged past the old man, and scurried away—going down the street to spread the news into every dad-burned ear that would listen to him!

Landlee now studied the boot-tracks, but it was only for a moment. He arose, swept the tracks away with his foot, and headed back into the office of the jail and straight upstairs. Betty was always up at the crack of dawn, but she was still in bed, sound asleep when he opened her door, after a short rap, and walked in. She was lying there with all her clothes on except a stout leather riding jacket hanging on a nearby chair.

"An' now," he growled when she was finally awake, "just where the hell did yuh meet the Polka Dot Kid to get that hoss back? Yuh brought Midnight in, not the Kid. There ain't nary track of him out there. Them's yore tracks in the hallway. Where is he?"

"I won't tell you!" She stiffened, sit-

ting there on the side of the bed, all signs of sleep vanishing. "You might have known that before you asked me, Grampa."

"Yeah, an' maybe I did," he scowled. "Still, young un, there's such a thing as takin' a latigo to a hair-brain like yuh now an' then an' just fannin' yuh until yuh sing like a banjo string. Don't make me mad. I've just had to knock hell outa Monkey Smith, an' I don't like fightin' before I've had my coffee. Go on!"

"Old danger speaking!" She reached up quickly and gave his goatee a little jerk. "I'm awfully afraid of you, and of course you knew that! Want me to run down for a latigo or make the coffee?"

"Some day, little un," he grimaced, "yo're goin' to prod me an inch too far. Go ahead, damn it, an' make the coffee. I mighta knowed yuh couldn't be bluffed. It doesn't run in the family, by gosh!"

But he was in another pickle, wading deeper and deeper into the troubled waters. He could see it in the look of the street when he went back downstairs. Saturday was a devil of a day for anything mean to break. Everybody and his brother's dog would be in town, the whiskey flowing in all the saloons. The tale of the Kid's having come back to town would start the old lament.

He did not have the slightest idea as to how bad it was really going to be until he saw Monkey Smith coming back up the street at a gallop with Droopy Brown following him, both hands still in bandages but usable to pull triggers again in a pinch.

"Yuh still figure the Kid didn't come in himself, huh!" Smith was yelling so the whole danged town could hear him when he came flopping in at the front door, mouth working like the mouth of a fish out of water. "Yo're goin' to have a job on yore hands talkin' yoreself outa this one, Hoss!"

"Shut up!" roared the sheriff, springing out of his old chair. "Don't come in here yellin' yore damn head off, Monkey. I ain't deaf an' I ain't dumb. Now what-in-hell yuh talkin' about?"

"The Polka Dot Kid," sneered Smith, "not only come back an' brought Mid-night home, he come back an' robbed the bank!"

"Huh?" Landlee's eyes popped. "What—what's that? Who—who told yuh that fool tale?"

"Snead Pawlin' himself." It looked like Monkey Smith wanted to burst loose and laugh right in his face. "There ain't no time lock on that vault, yuh know. Just when the clock was strikin' two this mornin' ol' Snead was awoke in his bed with somebody proddin' him in the ribs with a gun. It was the Kid. He made him get up an' dress, then he sneaked him down the back way an' made him open up the bank, an' he's cleaned that cracker-box outa a hundred thousan' dollars an' maybe a lot more."

"An'—an' if that happened at two o'clock this mornin'," stammered Landlee, "then why the thunder did Snead wait this long to spread the alarm?"

"The Kid didn't give him a chance." Smith was taking fiendish delight in his tale now. "The Kid locked him up in the vault, an' it was just a little while ago that Brown heard him groanin' through the breather pipe in the back wall of the vault."

CHAPTER SEVEN

All In the Family

IT WAS going to be mighty good election campaign stuff, something to stir the soft-hearted. Hoss Landlee could see that when he reached the bank where a milling and grumbling mob had already gathered and more and more wild-eyed humanity poured down the west slope. "Honest small-town banker robbed and locked inside his vault to suffocate." That would be the tale, the voters eating it up.

There was no chance of anybody with bat sense having to suffocate in the old vault of Snead Pawling's bank. A length of four-inch pipe ran through the steel and concrete rear wall, the inner end of it covered with a thin sheet of glass that only had to be broken by a man's fist wrapped in a handkerchief or the heel of his shoe to let air inside.

Snead Pawling—as big as the side of a house—had his face to the hole and was making an unholy lament about it until old Cass Miller, his slow-thinking cashier, got there and opened the vault. The

moment Pawling saw Hoss Landlee he started in on him.

"It's all because of your stupid bungling, Landlee!" he cried. "You must have known all along how your granddaughter felt about him. She turned him out of jail, a robber and murderer going as free as the wind to kill and rob again where and when he pleases! It was all I could do to keep him from killing me. He would have killed me if he had known about that air-hole inside. He locked me up thinking I would die and would never be on hand to testify against him if he was ever caught! In his high-handed way he thought no one would ever know who did this crime. He even boasted of it as he was closing the door!

"Not knowin', I reckon," frowned Landlee, "that bankers can read an' write? An' of course he couldn't see them two or three lamps yo've got inside—an' all the stacks of paper an' pens an' pencils lyin' around! How much do yuh figure he got away with?"

"Cass Miller can tell you!" snapped back the banker. "Cass knows to the penny, and I know we've lost more than one hundred thousand dollars. Gone! Like the wind, like the wind! The people are going to have to lose that money. Good, honest, hard-working people! Get out of my way, Hoss Landlee. I won't stand here and be questioned like a criminal—"

"Don't go pushin' me 'round, Snead!" The old man caught him by the collar, mean eyes burning as he glowered straight into his face. "Yuh are a criminal, plain an' proper, but yuh ain't very smart. Yo've played close to the fire with Swanky Dan Shrack so long yo've lost what little sense yuh ever did have. The Polka Dot Kid didn't rob yore damn bank. Nobody robbed it! Yo're just makin' a big noise to cover up somethin', an', by hell, it ain't workin'. Yuh musta seen my Betty 'round two o'clock this mornin' comin' in with Midnight. In the dark an' on that hoss ever'body knows so well she would look like the Kid. The Kid can't ride a hoss, an' for several weeks. His leg's broke an' lashed to a plank. Midnight throwed him a few days attar Betty had let 'im go. Doc Riley can tell yuh all that.

"Yuh see, Snead," he was still holding the amazed banker by the collar, "I've

been playin' some cards close to my belly 'round here. Today Tightwad Booth is bringin' him in an' I'm puttin' the Kid back in jail, but I've got a reprieve signed by the governor, an' it's up yonder in my safe. The Polka Dot Kid didn't kill Mr. Jim Wilson, that cow buyer, an' he's gonna get a new trial. He didn't take Wilson's big fine watch with the diamonds in the lids, an' he didn't take Wilson's big diamond ring an' his diamond cuff-links. Big Ike Beverly an' Bud Crow pawned the ring an' the watch in Helena. Big Ike's dead, an' Bud Crow might just as well be. I'm goin' to hang hell outa him before I'm done. Come along to the jailhouse, honey bunch. It ain't as fine as the capitol buildin' in Helena where you've been aimin' to go, but it's just as stout."

"What the hell's this fool trying to pull now!" Shrack was coming forward. At his heels trailed the redheaded Bud Crow. Before a man could blink Hoss Landlee had shoved the banker back and was covering all three of them with his old six-shooters.

"Reach!" he ordered, grimly. "I reckon yuh might say this is my lucky little Saturday mornin'! A little higher on yore stretch, Bud. Shrack can't protect yuh now. He's goin' to jail right along with yuh an' this banker fella who wanted to be governor."

"Why—why, you simple-minded, hair-brained old fool!" cried Shrack. "You can't put *me* in jail! Damn it, man, I'm the prosecuting attorney. And there's something else I might remind you—"

"Yuh don't need to remind me of nothin'." Quicker than a mink, Landlee had already stripped the six-shooters from Bud Crow's belt and stepped back. "I've been holdin' a letter in my pocket about yuh for three days now. Twenty-two people down yonder in New Mexico have looked at yore picture on yore election posters. To the man an' woman they're ready to swear that yo're the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron. The sheriff from down there oughta be here today on the ten o'clock northbound train."

He stumbled them out and up the street. Shrack's mouth was working, a white froth gathering at the corners of it, but he was not able to say a word. Crow was too dad-burned dumb to say anything.

The fool still had a look in his arrogant face that as good as said he knew Shrack would get him out of this. At the jail Monkey Smith and Droopy Brown were there, staring, their mouths open like fly-catchers. Reluctantly Smith took the keys and unlocked the door. A puff of wind would have knocked him and Brown over when the sheriff took their guns and ordered them inside to a cell.

"Yo're still tryin' to figure it out, ain't yuh?" He grinned at Shrack.

"Why—why, you old fool!" cried the lawyer. "Don't you know you can't saddle your own crime—"

"Yo'll have an alibi, yuh think," cut in Landlee quickly. "Only I reckon yuh won't. Seventeen years ago there was a fella tried an' sentenced to hang down there in east Texas for poisonin' his rich wife to get her money. He broke jail, an' men on the dodge can't build up an alibi very well. I dug up a couple of old dodgers, yuh see. If yuh would like to look at 'em I'll show 'em to yuh. But yuh won't care to see 'em. As the Wolf of the Cimarron—well, he didn't kill anybody. I imagine yuh won't get more'n ten or fifteen years, old as the case is. That beats hangin'. Yore neck's too thin to stand it. Think it over, cracker-jack."

"What in hell are we in jail for?" yelled Brown as Landlee turned away. "We ain't done nothin'."

"Maybe not," Landlee scowled, "but I guess Mr. Shrack can tell yuh what yore charges will be br'iled down or up to. Yuh fellas swore strings of lies forty miles long in court again the Kid. Yuh got Mr. Wilson's diamond cuff-links, Droopy, an' Monkey got his stick-pin an' both yuh dudes got some of his money. To my way of thinkin' that makes yuh fellas guilty of murder. Bud Crow's the kind who'll turn State's evidence to save his own danged neck. *Ho-hum-mm!*" He put his hands back over his kidneys and stretched. "Yuh don't reckon it's goin' to rain today, do yuh?"

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H E COULD not have picked a meaner day. At eight o'clock Tightwad Booth and his gang of hellions rode in, double-flanking a buck-

board in which the Polka Dot Kid was riding. Texas Charley Wade and his two outlaws were with them, all three of them now working for old Booth. With the right kind of protection Landlee aimed to give them as long as they followed the straight path, that dangerous trio would make good men yet. They carried the Kid upstairs, putting him to bed where Betty could see after him, and things looked like they were just about set.

At ten o'clock on the dot the northbound rolled in. A long-legged sheriff from New Mexico stepped off the train just behind Pedro Gonzales. Behind the sheriff trailed a string of Mexicans. With Wade and his pair keeping out of sight they headed straight for the jail. A knowing light filled the eyes of several of them when they saw Landlee, but no word of recognition escaped a single lip as they passed him.

As mad as a wet settin' hen, Shrack was marched out into the office, but Landlee made it a point to show him a couple of dodgers he had found in an old chest in the corner nearly four years ago. Helpless and slobbering, Shrack stood there, the Mexicans staring at him. To the last one except Pedro they raised their hands, pointing their fingers at him. Their words were all the same:

"*Sí, sí, señor*, that ees heem, the Lone Wolf of the Cimarron!"

"Agin I'll say it'll beat hangin'," whispered Landlee as he ushered Shrack back to his cell. "Yuh can make the southbound at eleven thirty if yo'll sign extradition papers. An' yo'll sign, smart bird, or I'll tell 'em about that wife poisonin' mess. Nope, don't cuss at me!" He gave him a shake when Shrack started to let fly a string of oaths. "I'll beat yore face into a cocked hat."

It was a pleasure to see the end of him at eleven thirty. Dazed, walking like a man in a trance, Shrack let the New Mexico sheriff shove him up the steps of the coach—wearing handcuffs and a dog-chain.

Landlee expelled a long sigh of relief when the train pulled out of Peace City and rumbled into the distance.

Hell hit the jackpot at four o'clock. It had been in the making all day. Mobs of riders had come galloping in. Half of

them wanted to take Snead Pawling out of jail and hang him. The tale had spread that he had robbed every man in the country out of his life's savings. Landlee had tried to get every saloon keeper in town to shut up shop, but he just couldn't close their doors without a court order, and the whiskey was flowing like waterfalls when he ordered Tightwad Booth to take his gang and get out of town.

"An' leave yuh with all this on yore hands?" growled the old cowman. "I won't do it!"

Landlee cut in: "Hell, Booth, I'm scareder of yore crowd than I am of the others. There's a heap of bad blood betwix yuh an' Nance Yardley. There's bad blood betwix yuh an' the Wild Bunch, an' the minute a gun goes off it's goin' to be a mess."

"But one man can't hold this mob, yuh danged ol' fool!"

"One man'll hold 'er or die at the switch. Yuh can leave me Wade an' the two men with 'im. They ain't got no set an' fast hate agin anybody, an' they're the kind to know how to hold their heads when the lead sorter gets to flyin' an' the powdersmoke a-br'ilin'. Get goin' an' don't monkey with me. I ain't in no humor for it. I'm up agin 'er an' know it, but I'm the law, an' I'm holdin' my fort agin all comers."

Stripped of his six-shooters, wanting

no gun-play, it was kind of lonesomish, he reckoned, standing out there in front of the jail beside a fire hydrant—when the mob came up the street, three hundred dad-burned people deep! The fire hydrant, a length of hose and a brass nozzle made his only hole-card. On it, by jingo, he would stand or fall.

The water system had always been the town's worst curse. Some jackass who called himself an engineer had sold the town on the system. Fed from a reservoir three miles up the canyon it had a drop of close to two hundred and fifty feet. Nobody could hang a pail under a dydrant without having the confounded pressure knock it out of his hand if he forgot and turned it on a mite too fast.

"Stand back!" Hoss Landlee yelled when the mob was forty feet away and slowing down for the rush he knew was coming. "Yo're just drunk, the whole mess of yuh, an' yuh ain't gonna do what yuh think. Nope, yain't! I want no gun-play, but if yuh do get past me yo'll meet it head-in from fellas I've got inside the jail."

"So yuh figure yuh can get sympathy without yore guns, huh?" Old Nance Yardley laughed at him, bullying him. "Yuh figure we can have our money stole an' do nothin'. Rush the damned ol' fool!"

He let them have his first dose by giving the wrench on top of the hydrant a



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fierce twist. The hose lifted, jerking and twisting him as if he were holding a powerful snake. A fighting old tomcat he held on and finally got his legs wound around the hydrant—and the ice-cold water poured straight into the crowd.

It was like a cannon ball striking a pile of shingles. Men went backward and down, lammed together, knocked off their feet, then swept up in a mauling, lunging crowd. Old Nance tried to shoot him. Landlee swept him off his feet with one roaring stream of water. He held them for a minute, then they were rushing again, this time in strung-out lines, making it hard to catch them in wads.

Tightwad Booth and a dozen of the saner ones of his crowd were getting into it when shooting started and it looked as if the old sheriff was a goner. Tightwad had left town, but he had sneaked back and broken into the rear window of the little volunteer fire-hose house. In a few minutes seven more lines of hose were into the melee. Horses were knocked down at hitchracks. In three minutes a general stampede had been started, running humanity, horses and barking dogs fleeing with their tails between their legs.

"Look behind yuh, Booth!" bawled Landlee. "The hotel porch! Don't let 'em start gun-play up there!"

It was a gang of the Wild Bunch, about fifteen of them ready to start throwing lead from the upper porch. It was disastrous when old Booth and two of his men swept that porch with water. It was old and shackley, not a safe place for so many men to gang up even if they were behaving themselves. Two shots were fired, then the water had it, ripping up old planks and sending them flying. Suddenly the whole porch was coming down, a pitching mass of broken wreckage loaded with men hurling out in the street, the water following them, tumbling them over one another.

Half-drowned men were weaving, cursing and rocking, trying to get out of the way. Those who still insisted on going for their guns had them swept out of their hands, themselves knocked a-windin'. Scores were down on their hands and knees, crawling like blinded monkeys. And still the water poured and churned,

throwing the most of them back and together to hold them in a wad in the middle of the street.

"We—we quit!" Nance Yardley was the first to start yelling for quarter. "Damn it, Hoss, we—we wanta go home!"

"Shore, now, that's the place for yuh!" bellowed back Landlee. "Oughta stayed there in the first place! Let them run, Booth, those what wanta run an' get outa town."

Landlee finally got his water shut off. Wet as a drowned dog himself, he stood there tying a dripping handkerchief around his left forearm where a bullet had nicked him. Never in his life had he seen a wetter and a more half-frozen gang of licked wretches trying to get out of town and back where they belonged. Not a saloon door was open to them. Booth and his crowd had seen to that by giving the saloons a swipe with their powerful hose lines.

About forty good six-shooters lay in the street, Landlee reckoned. They had either been knocked out of the hands of the fools about to use them or the roaring streams of water had lifted them from their holsters. About a dozen half-drowned fellas were lying there in the mud, having banged their heads against each other to knock themselves out when the water was tearing into them, ripping the breath from their lungs.

Texas Charley Wade now came down the steps. "That fight should go down in history." He grinned. "It was the toughest one-man show I ever saw, and the way you put it over on Shrack was a howl. I want to stick around this country, Mr. Landlee, and the two fellows with me want to stay. You won't need to tell us that we've got to hit it straight. That's settled. My kid brother's going to marry your granddaughter—"

"I sorter figured they'd hitch." Landlee grinned. "I like him. If she hadn't let him outa jail, then I was goin' to do it that night. Somethin' tells me I'm goin' to sorter like havin' yuh for kinfolks, Charley. Yain't sorry, I reckon?"

"It'll all be in the family." Wade grinned and thrust out his hand. "I'd go to hell for you, Hoss Landlee!"

THE END

Murder News For Broken Spoke

Ben Eagan was working over the
scrawny kid . . .



By **STEVE HERRINGTON**

John Mallory, publisher of the Broken Spoke Clarion, had a murder story he didn't dare print. And when Mallory drowned his taunting crusader ghost in whiskey—his young printer's devil took over the presses!

THE kid gave promise of being a big man. It was in the set of his head on his shoulders and the size of his hands and feet. He was old enough to have his full growth, but much of his weight was yet to come, delayed by hardships at which his gaunt ribs and pinched face and great eyes hinted plainly.

He slid through the open door of the

Clarion office and shrank back against the wall with the reckless, half-fearful look of a gambler who is about to risk his last stake and is afraid of the fall of the cards.

Old John Mallory was talking to Ben Eagan—listening, rather, to Eagan's confident, flat-voiced ultimatum. But old John saw the kid. He saw the staring eyes take in Eagan's broadcloth coat and white Stetson and fancy boots with open admiration. He saw those same eyes swing to himself, measuring with a swift accuracy few men could match.

That measurement made John Mallory feel a little uncomfortable. Time was when he'd let any man read his face. But the marks of many failures were traced on it, now. And the good which he had believed he once could do had vanished. He thought there was admiration in this strange kid's look—and that wasn't right. He stood up, cutting through Eagan's demands.

"All right, Ben," he said wearily. "So I come a little close to the edge. Time was I likely would have kicked the hell out of your shins. Now I'll stay off your toes. I'll run my sheet and you run the town. That's the way you want it, eh?"

Ben Eagan smiled tightly. "You've told me that a couple of times already, Mallory!" he snapped. "Just about once more over the traces for you and I'm going to have to take steps. I wouldn't forget it!"

Eagan turned, then, and plowed out of the office. Mallory heaved out of his chair and crossed the railing which separated the front part of the office from his desk and the welter of press, type-cases, and baled paper in which the *Clarion* was somehow born every Friday.

"Looking for me, Bub?" he called across to the kid.

The kid pushed away from the wall and moved toward him. "I'm looking for a job," he said slowly. "A printing job on a paper."

The words came earnestly. John Mallory could have asked him why he wanted a job on a paper. But he knew the answer to that query. It showed on the boy's face. And if that wasn't enough, Mallory could still remember the untarnished days of his own youth when he had believed there was nothing greater in life than printing words on paper for other men to read and

have faith in. Nothing greater in life. . . .

"Where'd you come from, Bub?" he asked gently.

"Down Dawson way—" the answer came reluctantly. "But I'm not telling you my name. I've got no near kin, but there's a family or two down there that need an extra hand in the field bad enough to maybe come after me if they knew I was here."

Mallory nodded. "Eighteen and underfed—" he said, more to himself than to the boy.

The kid's neck stiffened. "Eighteen next month," he answered. "And I'm not hungry—just a mite skinny!"

Mallory could see the hunger in the eyes and he liked the stiffness which shaped the denial. "All right, Bub," he said, and he pushed open the gate through the railing. "The kid from Dawson. All right. There's a bunk in my back room you can have if you don't snore. I'll do the cooking if you'll tidy dishes. And you can crank the press. . . ."



TWO days after the kid from Dawson moved into Mallory's back room, he sat hunched on a stool, watching old John setting type. It made John nervous. Not that he minded being watched when he was sober. But he was drunk, sunk in that careless haven which was his one retreat from Ben Eagan and the accusing echoes of the editorials he could not write and the news he dared not print. His fingers fumbled over the cases and he dropped a dozen slugs in as many minutes. Finally he wheeled on the silent kid.

"Damn it!" he roared. "What kind of a paper is this? Think you're paid for sitting on your tail? Get out! Rustle some ads or a subscriber or some news!"

A startled look crossed the kid's face at the heat in Mallory's words. But it passed and a bright eagerness took its place. He slid from the stool, grinning. "Yes sir!" he said. And he dodged out the door.

That night Gotch Pearson was shot through the belly.

Talk got around toward midnight that the shooting had taken place in Eagan's

Golden Oak saloon and that Ben, himself, had fired the shot which dropped Pearson. Eagan stopped the talk with the charge that Pearson had stood up to his bar and called him a string of names that no man could pass without a fight. Gotch had just been a little slow in backing up his tongue, that was all.

All Broken-Spoke knew that Gotch Pearson had been tongue-tied since birth and that he couldn't get three words out in succession, let alone the sulphurous string of oaths Ben Eagan charged he had used. There were a few of Broken-Spoke's citizens—like old John Mallory—who knew the rest of it, Eagan held a trust deed on Pearson's ranch. Gotch's widow had been an invalid for years. And with Gotch gone, she wouldn't be able to get help on the place. There wasn't a rider in the county reckless enough to hire out on a spread at which Big Ben Eagan had pointed his thick-jointed finger.

Those citizens who knew these things also knew that foreclosure would follow Gotch's death as surely as thunder follows lightning. But they held their peace. Each of them was afraid to protest individually against something they all lacked the sand to fight collectively.

Mallory pulled a bottle from his drawer and slumped deep into his chair. He sat for more than an hour, composing the blistering editorial which would get no farther than the alcoholic fumes in his own head.

He was sitting with his bottle, lost in bitterness and self-condemnation, when the kid from Dawson came in. Mallory had forgotten about his press man. For a moment he didn't recognize him. One of his eyes was puffed shut and both of his hands were swollen and one cheek was cut. The kid had somebody else with him, caught in the grip of one of the kid's battered hands. This somebody was so mauled that it was seconds before Mallory's drifting mind realized he was one of the whiskey-soaked wrecks who swamped out the Golden Oak and kept the place tidied.

The kid grinned crookedly at Mallory and pushed through the gate, dragging his prisoner. He shoved the dazed swamper into the backroom and turned the key in the lock of the door. Panting, his eyes bright and his thin frame straight with

pride, he trotted back to the old desk.

"Did I make it?" he asked. And he shot his eyes hopefully at the press forms stacked beside the type-cases.

"Make it?" Mallory's mind was comfortably slow. Drunkenness was his refuge and he had never been ashamed of it before. But he was, now. And it made him testy.

"Make it?" he repeated. "Make what, you brawling idiot? Talk sense!"

Swift hurt darkened the kid's eyes, blanketing the elation there. There was no anger in the look he turned on Mallory—only a kind of pity which stung more deeply than a grown man's scorn. And there was a bitterness in the gaze he stabbed at the bottle by Mallory's elbow.

"Tomorrow's Friday," the kid said quietly. "I was afraid I'd be too late to help run this week's issue!"

Mallory stirred uneasily. The kid was right. Tomorrow was Friday. He sat partially up in his chair, but the office reeled in a comfortable haze. The bottle swam before his eyes. It was nearly empty. He shook his head like an old dog. He couldn't set type with that much whiskey in his belly. And what the hell did a deadline mean on the *Clarion*, anyway? Broken-Spoke's paper was a joke. He turned to the boy, pleading and apologetic.

"A man was killed tonight," Mallory said slowly. "A good friend. I don't feel like setting up the issue. It'll read as good Saturday as it would tomorrow—"

The kid's eyes suddenly hardened and his lips fined down. "Gotch Pearson was a friend of yours?" he gasped. "And you sit here—" He didn't finish it, but his eyes jumped to the whiskey bottle again.

Mallory saw that hardness and wanted to defend himself. But he couldn't think of words.

"I've got a story!" the kid went on sharply. "The whole thing. It's got to go in!"

Mallory was very tired. The fumes in his head rose more thickly. There was fight in the kid's voice. A ghost of a smile touched Mallory's lips. He'd been like that himself. He didn't want to kill the kid's fight. He stood up unsteadily, waving his hand at the office.

"The place is yours. Lay on, McDuff! But unlock that back door, first.

I'm turning in! Gonna catch some shut-eye."

In the back room, old Mallory rolled onto his bunk. He didn't even pay any attention to the heavy breathing of the battered swamper crouched across the kid's bunk. Let the kid have his innings in the office. It took years to learn typesetting and the locking of forms and the setting up of a paper. It was a good time for the kid to find this out. Let him work out his enthusiasm over his first story, trying to set it up. In the morning he'd be cooled down a bit.

John Mallory went to sleep with the full knowledge he was a drunken, yellow-bellied coward who had not fought against the ruination of his town and now would not lift a hand to square the murder of an old and good friend. . . .



SUN slanted brilliantly in through a tear in the ragged blind over the window above Mallory's bed. The bright, clean sun of early morning. It beat into Mallory's eyes when he opened them and prodded the trip-hammers chipping at the inside of his skull into redoubled savagery. The old tin alarm clock on the shelf above the wash stand focused and Mallory stared unbelievably at the hour—half after five! Mallory grunted. It had been years since he'd wakened at an ungodly hour like this.

He rolled over. There was a man on the other cot. Mallory scowled. So that was it! The kid's prisoner. That's what had wakened him.

"Hey!" he grunted in sour anger.

Then he saw the man still slept. And he saw, also, that the swamper had not been prowling the room. He was neatly and efficiently tied, his wrists to the head rail and his ankles to the foot rail of the cot on which he lay. Confound that Dawson kid! He was too damned thorough!

Suddenly the street door of the shop shook under an insistent pounding. Mallory swung his legs from the cot, grumbling. It had been this pounding which had awakened him. There was sulphur on his thick, dry tongue. All Broken-Spoke knew the *Clarion* editor slept till mid-morning and that the office didn't

open till noon. The whole town knew that!

Growling, wincing inwardly at the hammering of his head, he shuffled out through the office and unbarred the front door. Chad Miller stood in the opening and the sun struck a sharp gleam from the sheriff's badge into Mallory's throbbing eyes.

Chad's face was all screwed up with something important. He pushed past Mallory and sat down on the office railing.

"Damn you, John," the sheriff said, "you might have let us know you aimed to pull the cork!"

There was condemnation in Miller's voice, but a kind of admiration in his eyes which John Mallory had not seen for years. Old John rubbed his fingers through the thin hair over his throbbing temples.

"Come back in an hour, Chad," he begged. "You know better than to turn me out this time of day! What the hell you talking about?"

"This—" the sheriff said.

Reaching into his hip pocket, he pulled out a folded sheaf of paper and spread it flat on his knee. Mallory stared stupidly for a long moment. There was something familiar about the *Clarion* banner heading the sheet. But the rest of it was a printer's nightmare. Run on a press with ten times too much ink on its plate and roller, the ragged columns under the banner were a hodgepodge of upper case and lower case letters, indiscriminately set together. Some were inverted. Others were reversed. And the form hadn't been properly locked on the press bed so that many of the slugs had dropped out.

John Mallory stared at the limp sheet for a horrified pair of seconds. Nothing less than a forceful bath in the frigid creek back of town would have cleared his head after the way he'd emptied that bottle last night. But this caricature of a newspaper cleared it—and cleared it fast!

"Good Lord!" he breathed agonizingly.

Wheeling, he stared at the office behind the railing. Mallory had never been a tidy man. A gent with ink in his veins and a whole paper to run by himself seldom is. But the slow accumulation of half a lifetime of disorder had been doubled in a single night. The whole area back of the railing was a shambles of ink-smeared paper and scattered type and blackened fingerprints.

"That kid!" he swore. "That wall-eyed, thin-bellied, fire-eating, rattle-brained kid!" He spun back to Chad Miller. "Let me see that sheet!"

The sheriff passed the *Clarion's* latest issue across to him. A clumsy center box took up most of the crazy front page:

last nite a Nabor was kilt in The golden oak saloon a good friend of everybody That had no Enemy he wAs shoT in tHe belly by a Man?-* thE cLarIon kNows whO donE it aNd has prOOf it Was mUrDeR by REAsOn of AnothEr man wHo seen thE fOul deED DOnE by his BoSS wIth-ouT the deaD man haVing a chansT and WILL sweAR tO samE or get his EARS knoCKed down some MOre/8/. At tEn oClock ThIs morning the cLarIon wIlL turn this WITNESS over to the SHERIFF foR the ARREST of the Killer uNLEss MISTEr BeN EAGAn LeAVES tOWn WITH His frIEnds BEfore ThaT hOUr.

AssTnT. EditorE,
thE CLARion #æ—/.

"Mother of Mercy!" John Mallory moaned. "That benighted, be-devilled, be-damned young idiot!"

Chad Miller pushed back his hat. "John," he said slowly, "you had nothing to do with this?"

Mallory shook his head wordlessly.

"That's too bad, John," the sheriff said. "Broken-Spoke's coming to life. I was stopped a dozen times on my way here. Everybody had a paper. And everybody had a look in their eyes. This is the best damned issue to ever come off your press!"



"DON'T preach to me, Chad!" Mallory snapped. "This is the damndest piece of foolishness you ever seen and you know it! We're all in the same boat. We'll pull faces at Eagan when he ain't looking. But when one of them four gunhands he keeps hanging around the Golden Oak wakes up and comes across this paper—when he's hauled it upstairs for his boss to see and Eagan hits the street headed this way—why, how many bright eyes you going to find along the walks then? None. Everbody will start crawling for a hole!" Mallory paused explosively and pushed open the gate in the rail.

The sheriff shot a questioning glance at

him. "What you going to do, John?"

"Do?" Mallory roared. "I'm gettin' my coat. Then I'm going to hunt down that kid and club him cold before he thinks up somethin' worse than this. Then I'm headin' for the Golden Oak and wake Eagan up before somebody else beats me to it!"

Chad Miller shook his head sadly. "I'll go up the street and pick up as many of these papers as I can, then," he said. "But blast me down, John, you'd never guess what I come down here for in the first place. Maybe I'm as crazy as that kid. But I filled my belt-loops and come down to stand with you. Reckon I had a hope for a minute that there was one gent in this town with enough sand to stand up to Ben Eagan!"

Mallory swore savagely and jerked his coat from the old hat-tree beside his desk. But before he could pull it on the street door swung open and the kid from Dawson plunged into the office. He was plastered with ink from hair to boots and his eyes were ringed with weary shadows. But there was a wide, reckless grin of triumph across his face.

He didn't seem to see the anger clouding Mallory's features or the heavy, beaten set of the sheriff's mouth.

"I did it!" the kid exulted. "I got the issue out! And I run an extra hundred copies—sold 'em all, too. Never knowed folks'd grab at a paper that way!"

He seemed to suddenly see the sheriff for the first time. He brought himself up short.

"See here," he protested. "Mister Mallory been tellin' you about my prisoner in the back room? This ain't the way it's supposed to be. You ain't to come down here after him till ten o'clock! I give Ben Eagan that long to skin out'n town and he's goin' to get what I promised him. It's my prisoner. I whupped him into talkin' and I'll hold him 'till the time comes. We're playin' this square. Eagan gets his chance!"

The sheriff shook his head hopelessly. Mallory shoved forward and caught the kid by his shoulder.

"Listen, you beetle-brained young sky-rocket, you ain't got no prisoner! You don't know nothin' about how Gotch Pearson got killed. You was making a wild

guess when you run this issue and you run it as a joke on me because I got too drunk last night. Understand? Tell it the same way to everybody. And don't get smart when you talk to Eagan. Now—skin into the back room and turn that swamper loose. Promise him you'll beat his brains out again if he talks about you bringin' him here last night to his boss. Then scrub off some of that ink and we'll go up to the Golden Oak!" Mallory growled in his throat.

The kid from Dawson stared at Mallory for a baffled instant. It was the hardest look to stand up to that John Mallory had ever faced. But facing the kid down meant saving the *Clarion* and the kid's hide, as well as his own. So John Mallory held his features rigid and made his eyes bleak.

Comprehension slowly crossed the kid's face. "You're going to crawl!" he muttered. And he made it sound like he'd just discovered a man of God serving Satan. Suddenly his head jerked up. "You're still drunk!" he charged hotly. "Go ahead and crawl. You'll be sorry tomorrow! Go ahead and crawl, but you ain't dragging the paper with you!"

His heat stunned Mallory. Before he knew it the kid had shaken Mallory's grip from his shoulder, vaulted the rail, and jerked a gun from Chad Miller's belt. Astonished, old training moved instinctively in the sheriff. Chad reached for his second weapon. The kid brought the barrel of the first down smartly onto Chad's head. The sheriff grunted and collapsed on the floor. The kid snaked the second gun out of the man's belt and thrust the muzzles of the pair into Mallory's paunchy middle.

"Pick him up!" the kid snapped at John Mallory.

Reckless amber lights of a terrible anger ran in the kid's eyes. Mallory was afraid of that recklessness. He bent, awkwardly lifted the sheriff to his shoulder, and started toward the door to the back room ahead of the prodding guns. As he reached the opening, he turned for a moment. His eyes reached past the kid to the front windows. Five men were stepping into the street, heading purposefully toward the front of the *Clarion* office.

He gagged: "Here comes Eagan!"

THE kid didn't turn his head. One hand flashed out to shove roughly at Mallory. Mallory stumbled and staggered into the back room, spilling the sheriff onto the empty bunk and half falling himself. He turned in time to see the kid toss the sheriff's two guns into the room and jerk the door shut.

The sheriff stirred on the bunk and sat dazedly up, anger at the blow which had dropped him flaring up in his eyes as consciousness returned. Mallory made a quick sign for silence with his fingers. He could hear the bootfalls of Eagan and his four gunmen on the walk out front. Eagan wouldn't listen to explanations, now. But if the kid told the right kind of a story, the *Clarion* and its owner would be left clear when Ben had settled with the kid. After all, the boy was still a boy and Ben wouldn't be too hard on him.

The *Clarion* office shook as Eagan and his men batted open the door. Mallory could hear as though he was in the outer room.

"Where's John Mallory?" Eagan thundered.

The kid's voice came back, thin and tight, but easy enough. "What you want to see him about? He's sleepin'."

"He'll sleep a hell of a long time when I've finished with him!" Big Ben snapped. "I told him to keep me out of his blasted paper and I meant it!"

"Mister Mallory didn't put you in the paper," the kid answered. "You done that yourself. A printer don't make news. Folks do. You got no quarrel with the *Clarion*. I never put a thing in it that wasn't so!"

There was a pause. Then Ben Eagan spoke with malevolent quiet.

"You never put a thing in it? Then you're the one that did this! Boys, get hold of this damned little crusader's arms. He's goin' to get a lesson!"

"You aim to finish him, Boss?" one of Eagan's men asked.

"Not quite!"

"You could and you wouldn't get no place!" the kid cried defiantly. "You can gut-shoot a man down. But you can't kill a paper!"

His words were chopped off by the soft, sudden sound of solid flesh driven against other flesh.

Chad Miller touched Mallory's arm. His face was strained and pallid and a thick sweat dampened it.

"He ain't comin' back here, John. We're clear of it!"

The sheriff tried to make his voice sound relieved and grateful. But he missed fire and he flinched at the sound of another blow from the office. John Mallory nodded. The kid had fronted and stopped Eagan from coming back. Eagan wouldn't lay any of this to the *Clarion's* owner. That was what Mallory had wanted. He had wanted to be left in peace, to escape the ruthless anger with which Ben Eagan handled any who bucked him. The kid moaned again out front.

John Mallory stood up. The hammering was still chipping at his skull. But the kid's defiance out-dinned it in his head:

"You can't kill a paper!"

"No, by hell!" he said tightly.

He picked up the sheriff's two guns from the floor and handed one to Miller.

"Let's go, Chad—" he said. And he dragged open the door.

Two of Ben Eagan's men stood just inside the door of the office, ready to stop anyone who might come in off of the street. The other two had caught the kid's elbows and had backed him up against the rail dividing the office. They had him held tightly there and Ben Eagan was standing a yard in front of him, working the flinching, scrawny body into a pulp with his huge, driving hands. John Mallory hadn't fired a gun in half a dozen years, but he caught the near gunman beside the kid with a slug through the head. Almost simultaneously Chad Miller dropped the other.

Suddenly released, the kid took a staggering, sobbing step and sprawled out on the floor. Ben Eagan leaped back, palmed a gun, and snapped a shot which passed between the sheriff and Mallory so close

to each that it tugged at the shirts of both. The sheriff, a faster man, opened up on the two gunmen at the door, and gun-echoes made a hell of the *Clarion* office. Mallory saw Eagan's face in front of him and he kept on working the action of the weapon in his hand until the hammer fell on empties. He might have kept on even after that if the sheriff hadn't touched his arm.

"Easy does it, John."

Mallory's eyes swept the room. Eagan was down. Everybody was down but Chad and himself. But only one of them counted, now. He bent over the kid and raising him, carried him to the chair behind his desk. The whiskey bottle was there. He got a little down the kid's throat and saw the puffy eyes open. He saw, also, that the kid was afraid of what he'd think—that the kid wanted to please him and was afraid that he'd lost his job.

Old John Mallory dipped a pen and drove it furiously across a sheet of paper, conscious of the kid watching him anxiously. Suddenly he straightened.

"Chad, come over here a minute. Want you to witness my signature!"

"Signature?" Chad grunted.

Mallory picked up the remains of the bottle of whiskey and nodded.

"Partnership agreement," he said and grinned widely at the kid. "Mallory and Dawson—Printers!" he said.

And he smashed the whiskey bottle across the bed of the press.

The kid's eyes brightened and a vestige of a smile pulled at his battered lips. But when he spoke, his eyes were not on the paper Chad Miller was witnessing but on the whiskey dripping from the press.

"I'm glad you did that—"

Mallory's eyes twinkled in sudden humor. "You damned reformer!" he said. And his hand dropped to the kid's shoulder.

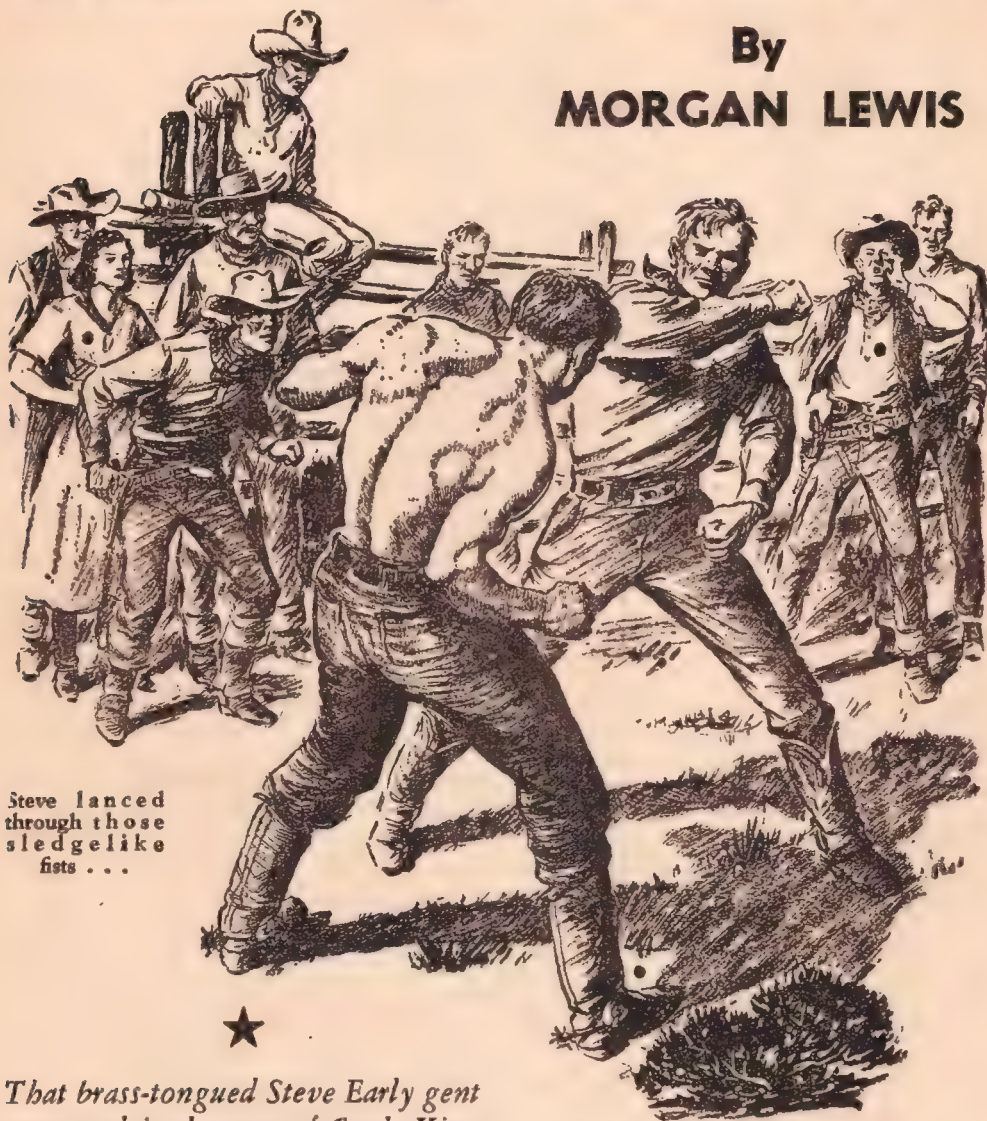
THE END

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Rebellion At The Lazy Y

By
MORGAN LEWIS



Steve lanced
through those
sledge-like
fists . . .



That brass-tongued Steve Early gentle sure stuck in the caw of Cattle King Yard—for Yard wanted men to bow and scrape before him. But he needed roundup hands and had to postpone his man-breaking tactics—till he got Steve at the beef shipping center.



STEVE EARLY drifted in to the big Lazy Y spread, applied for a job and got it, only because old Yard was caught short handed for the fall drive.

Old Yard didn't cotton to this black-haired, wide-shouldered young puncher with the slim, straight back. Being the biggest cattleman in these parts, he had grown heavy and stiff necked with pride and he liked men to approach him hat in

hand—not with a laughing devil in their eyes that said like it or go to hell.

Old Yard's dislike was quick and instantaneous but he swallowed it and took him on; for he needed help badly. After the first day Old Yard knew he had hired himself a tophand. But the way Steve Early looked at Old Yard's daughter, Jennifer, didn't help any.

Steve was stowing stuff into the chuckwagon and when she appeared he dropped a frying pan with a clatter that banged out over the yard. He took off his hat with a wide sweep of arm and his smile was quick and warm.

"Good mornin', sis," he drawled. "Now I know I've come to the right place."

Jennifer's gray eyes opened in startled surprise. This wasn't the way a wandering cowpoke spoke to the cattle king's daughter. But there was a calm assurance about him and a glint of reckless deviltry in his eyes that stirred an answering spark within her. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips before she turned away. She walked sedately to the house, her back straight as an arrow and the sun glinting on her black hair.

Old Yard swore and called his ramrod. Ace HULKINS was a big man with the hard, square fists of a fighter. There was a black look on his face as he paused before Yard. It had been there ever since Early's greeting to Jennifer and her answering smile.

Old Yard's eyes went past HULKINS to stare murkily at Early. "He's too damned sure of himself," he growled. "You better learn him some manners."

HULKINS grinned in quick anticipation and rubbed a heavy arm. He ruled the crew with an iron sway by reason of his heavy fists and his ability to whip any man on the Lazy Y domain.

"Let him make one wrong step," he assured Old Yard, "and I'll beat hell outa him."

"Don't lay him up," Old Yard cautioned, "we're shorthanded."

But in the days that followed, Steve didn't make that one wrong step that HULKINS was looking for. He got on well with the crew, although he didn't talk much, and his work left no room for criticism.

The Lazy Y was shipping a lot of stock

that fall and the work was heavy. Steve and the rest of the crew worked from can to can't and rolled into their blankets at night, bone tired. HULKINS drove them mercilessly, his sultry eyes ever on Steve, driving him harder than the rest, giving him the worst and the hardest jobs. And Steve took them and grinned.

"Why in hell don't yuh quit?" Shorty Peters asked. "A tophand like yoreself can git a job most anywheres."

Jennifer came down to the corral for her morning ride at that moment and Steve's eyes followed her. "The sign's not right just yet for quitin'," he said.

Shorty noted the direction of Steve's gaze and snorted. "Yuh follow that sign," he observed, "an' yuh'll wind up six feet under. Ace HULKINS aims to stake out a claim there."

Steve grinned. "I reckon he hasn't filed it yet."

"He ain't in no hurry with Old Yard backin' him," Shorty said. "Matter of fact, he don't need no backin'. Don't even pack a gun. All he needs is his fists."

They swung into the saddle and headed for the smoky haze of Indian Ridge. Presently they separated, Shorty angling to the south and Steve heading north to work the draws for strays.

A mile farther on he overtook Jennifer on her bay mare. She turned her head to him as he swung in beside her and her gray eyes widened a trifle.

"Mornin', Miss," Steve said respectfully enough, but his eyes said something entirely different.

Jennifer wasn't used to being looked at like that and warmth crept into the smooth tan of her cheek. But there was nothing she could put her finger on. "I suppose you know you'll be in trouble if Ace or my father sees us together," she said.

Steve knew she was right. "It'll be worth it," he said.

Jennifer took a quick breath. "Haven't you a girl of your own?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Never met one I wanted 'till I saw you."

Her smile vanished; this was going too far. "You mustn't talk like that," she said but her tone lacked absolute conviction.

Steve grinned. "Why not?" he asked

calmly. "We'll be leavin' here together one of these days."



JENNIFER rode without answer, her eyes fixed primly ahead. They passed bands of prime two and three-year olds each wearing a vented Circle T brand with Old Yard's Lazy Y beneath it. This was the stock that was to be shipped shortly.

"Nice lookin' steers," Steve observed.

Jennifer nodded. "Dad got them at a bargain last spring. They came from a big outfit across the mountains."

"Why did they sacrifice stuff like that?" Steve wondered.

Jennifer shrugged. "I suppose they needed the money." She looked over the range that seemed to stretch endlessly to the east and her back straightened. Her voice became sharp. "Here comes Ace!"

Steve looked and saw Hulkins coming from the direction of the ranch, his pony on a dead run.

Jennifer turned her face to Steve while the drum of hoofs swept to them. "Maybe you can out-run him," she suggested tensely.

Steve shook his head. "I reckon I'll wait and see what he wants," he replied, his tone unhurried.

Her eyes ran over his rangy form. "Ace weighs at least two hundred. You'll be giving away over twenty pounds. He'll murder you!"

"Maybe," Steve said noncommittally. "We'll see."

They pulled up and waited while Hulkins' lathered pony, nostrils flaring, pounded up and slid to a stop.

Ace, sweating as much from rage as his exertions, piled off and strode over to them. There was grim anticipation in his heavy face. "Botherin' you, Jennifer?" he barked.

"Oh, no," the girl said quickly. "We both just happened to be going the same way."

But Hulkins' one-way brain could not be sidetracked thus easily. "I'll learn him in his place!" he promised. He stepped up beside Steve's horse. "Git down!" he roared. "Me an' you is goin' to have a little talk."

Steve shook his head gently. "Not just yet, Ace."

Hulkins swore. "Maybe I'll have to haul you down." He reached for Steve—and found himself looking into the muzzle of a .44.

"Hands off," Steve said quietly. "You'll get your chance—but not before I'm ready."

Hulkins paused with hand in mid-air, his ugly anger prompting him to try to beat the gun.

Steve saw the calculation in his narrowed eyes. "Try it," he invited. "I won't kill you but you'll be laid up for a full month while your shoulder wound drains."

There was an assured quality in Steve's voice that set the big ramrod back on his heels. His hand dropped while frustration made his face vicious.

"I knowed you wasn't man enough to take a lickin'," he snarled. He swung away and remounted his heaving horse. "Don't come back to the ranch," he warned. "You're fired!"

Steve holstered his gun. "I'll be back," he promised. "Old Yard hired me and I reckon Old Yard himself will have to do the firin'."

Hulkins gave Jennifer a flat, level stare from under heavy brows. "You comin' back with me? It was more an order than a question."

"Later," she said and watched him jerk the pony around.

When he was gone, she turned to Steve and said biting, "It doesn't take much nerve to pull a gun on an unarmed man."

"No," Steve said gently, "I reckon it doesn't." He paused and when he spoke again there was a note of banter in his voice. "You wouldn't want us to stage a fight before a lady?"

Jennifer took up the slack in her reins and her voice became distant. "You'd better not come back," she warned coldly. "Dad and Ace will both be after your scalp." She whirled the bay and left without waiting for a reply.

Steve sat slackly in the saddle and watched her go. She sure has got her dander up, he mused. Then he chuckled. Despite her sudden flare-up, Jennifer wasn't following the trail of the big ramrod.

IT WAS near sundown when Steve rode into the corral and pulled his saddle. Old Yard stepped from the shadow of the stables. "So you come back!" he said grimly. The usual importance in his tone was heightened by anger. "I won't have a hand around that pulls a gun on my foreman. Soon as this stock is shipped you're pullin' your freight. An' stay away from my daughter. She ain't no honkatonk girl for you to be makin' up to."

Steve grinned and took his saddle in to the rack. Ace Hulkins strode up beside the Lazy Y owner and stared furiously after Steve.

"Keep a check on yourself 'till this stuff is shipped!" Old Yard ordered him. "After that he's your meat."

hung over the work-ridden crew like a pall, tightening nerves already tensed by the incessant grind and making uncertain tempers sharper. Only the cowpuncher's code of not quitting an outfit in a tight held the crew together.

Old Yard either didn't see or didn't care what was happening. If he could get the work done with half the number of men and save on wages it was all right with him. He looked into the big holding corral by the shipping pens and seemed to swell with complacent importance.

They were crammed with cattle all in prime shape to bring top market prices. A good half of them wore the vented Circle T brand. Tomorrow they would be shipped out and, because he had bought them at ruination rates for the seller, his

Morgan Lewis, author of the story you are now reading, will be with us again next month with a powerful novelette of poignant strife in the Old West. He calls it, "To Hell With Barbwire!" Watch for the on-sale date of January 7th—and reserve your copy NOW!

Hulkins stretched his big arms until the muscles cracked. He grinned wolfishly. "I ain't makin' no promises."

The sight of Steve and Jennifer together had aroused a black hatred in Hulkins that went far deeper than his usual bullying attitude towards the crew. Thoughts of how Steve had checked him at gunpoint before the girl crawled through his mind until the bitter anger that welled into his throat threatened to choke him.

At night he would push himself up from his bunk to stare across the moonlit darkness at the man in the opposite bunk—and always there would be a slight movement and the glint of light on gun-barrel. Hulkins would curse softly to himself and lie down again.

Days, the strained watchfulness continued, each man watching the other like a hawk and Steve never letting the big ramrod get in back of him.

All during the time that the gather was completed and the herd driven to the shipping center, Hulkins' black animosity continued to grow and spread until it

profit would run into many thousands.

He paused beside his ramrod and his arrogant eyes fastened on Steve who was riding past. "What's he got that talley book stuck in his pocket for?" he wanted to know.

Hulkins noted it with sudden unease in his glance.

"Damned if I know," he swore. "First time I seen it."

"He's through tomorrow morning," Old Yard said with a vicious satisfaction. It pleased him to be able to fire a man—tell him he was through. He always did it while others were present and he invariably made an unpleasant business of it.

Hulkins drew a deep, soft breath. "That means the ban's off," he said.

Old Yard nodded. "When you're finished with him get that book. I want to see what's in it."

He turned away and went to the hotel where he had engaged room for himself and Jennifer. He rapped on her door and she let him in. "I'm firin' that saddle

bum, Early," he said. "He won't bother you no more when Ace gets finished with him."

Jennifer stood straight before him, a softer, feminine counterpart of himself before greedy prosperity had brought beef to his body and swollen pride and arrogance to his spirit.

"He hasn't bothered me," she said meeting Old Yard's angry gaze steadily. "He's the best hand you have on the place. Why do you hate him?"

Old Yard turned red. "By damn!" he swore, "Ace told me you was gettin' soft about him but I didn't believe it."

Jennifer's eyes flashed. "He's clean and decent—and he's a man!"

Old Yard's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How d'ye know?"

"I've talked to him," she answered. "I can tell."

His temper suddenly slipped its leash. "Damn it!" he roared, "I won't have you runnin' after any saddle bum that rides in. I got money and you'll marry somebody decent!"

"Like Ace?" she suggested sarcastically.

Old Yard was unused to opposition and he could not and would not brook it. "You'll marry who I say!" His big hand swept out and left its red print on her cheek's smoothness.

Jennifer recoiled a step, a hand going quickly to her mouth as though to suppress a cry.

His eyes stared at her a moment from the angry red of his face, a little abashed at what he had done. But it was not in him to apologize. He turned on his heel and strode out.



SHORTY PETERS looked up in surprise as the Lazy Y owner came up to him; usually Old Yard ordered men to come to him. "I'm firin' Steve Early in the mornin'," Old Yard announced bluntly, "an' he might kick up some trouble. I want you to come up behind him and get his gun."

Shorty's usually twinkling blue eyes turned frosty. "Yuh can do yore own dirty work," he said flatly. "I'm through doin' two men's work for one man's pay.

Soon's them steers is loaded I'm drawin' my time."

Steve Early had a bath, a haircut and a shave. He put on clean clothes and went to the hotel for a room. The big overhead lamp was glowing softly as the clerk passed him a key with its brass number tag. Steve shoved it in the pocket of his levis.

He crossed the lobby and came face to face with Jennifer. The girl's eyes widened and she shot a quick glance about the empty lobby. "Dad's firing you in the morning," she said swiftly. "Ace will be along—keep your gun handy."

Steve's grin was easy. "Last time you said you didn't think much of me for pullin' a gun on an unarmed man."

"I was wrong," Jennifer said. "I didn't know how much they hated you. It wouldn't prove anything to let Ace give you a beating."

The grin left Steve's face and his glance steadied on her. "Remember I told you that when the sign was right we'd pull out together?"

The girl nodded faintly. "Are you sure," she asked a little breathlessly, "that you want to?"

"Certain sure," Steve said softly with profound conviction.

A light leaped into the girl's eyes and as quickly died down. "Dad would never stand for it," she said drearily. "He'll find some underhanded way to block you."

Steve's grin reappeared. "After I get fired in the morning," he said, "you have your warbag packed and I'll stop back for you. I don't reckon he'll be able to stop us."

Jennifer flushed a trifle. "It would be better to leave now and not wait for morning."

Steve shook his head. "It'd be easier now but harder in the long run—besides, the sign won't be right until tomorrow."

"Here comes dad," she interrupted quickly. She left him and walked swiftly across the lobby as Old Yard pushed in through the doorway. Steve went up to his room with the sound of Old Yard's angry voice in his ears. . . .

It was the beginning of a clear, bright day when Steve reached the big corral where the cattle were milling restlessly.

The rest of the crew were already there together with Ace Hulkins and Old Yard. Steve knew the time had come.

Even if he hadn't known, the sour dolefulness on the crew's faces, the hungry anticipation on Hulkins' and the important assuredness about Old Yard would have warned him.

Old Yard waited until he got close to them before he boomed so that everyone within range would hear. "You're late but it don't make no difference. You're fired! Get your warbag and clear out and don't never set foot on Lazy Y range again."

Steve grinned a little. "I've been sort of expectin' it," he said, "now that you've got your stock all ready to ship."

Old Yard didn't answer. He turned his back on Steve and walked off.

Ace Hulkins moved up before Steve, his body body tense as a muscle. "I've got your pay," he said and pulled out a handful of silver. He counted out Steve's wages and handed them over. As Steve held out his hand for the money, Ace let it drop. The cartwheels chimed on the hard packed earth and Hulkins' grin was ugly.

"Mebbe you're man enough to take that gun off and make me pick them up," he offered.

But as he spoke he couldn't control his eyes; they slid past Steve's shoulder to some point in back of him.

Steve twisted and dropped a hand to his gun as another hand reached for it—and missed. He brought back the sharp point of his left elbow and there was a pained grunt as it took Old Yard in his pompous belly.

Steve half turned and stepped clear of the two men, his face set in hard, flat planes. "I figured you'd try somethin' like that," he said.

Hulkins stood there making no motion, his face mean and ugly in his disappointment.

But Old Yard blustered in pain and chagrin. "You're a trouble maker," he blatted. "I'll have you locked up for pullin' a gun on me."

Steve walked over to a corral post, unbuckling his gunbelt as he went. He draped it over the post and turned to face the glowering ramrod. "Now," Steve

said, his eyes like polished steel, "we'll see about that lickin' you've been promisin' me."



JENNIFER arose early and without taking time for breakfast went down to the loading pens, impelled by a sense of impending disaster. She came within sight of them and saw the crew spread in a rough circle and two men in the center. There was a sudden catch in her heart when she recognized Steve and the towering figure of Hulkins.

Whatever could be said against Old Yard, he came of fighting stock and Jennifer ran true to form. After that first shock of dismay the spirit flamed strongly within her and she ran, her divided skirt swinging about her knees. She avoided the bulky figure of her father and went around to the opposite side of the circle.

Old Yard saw her and yelled, "Get outa here, Jen. This ain't no place for you!"

Jennifer ignored him and her eyes went to Steve. "You'll win, Steve!" she called.

Hulkins turned his head to her and his face was aflame with anger. Then he moved in swinging, all the power of his massive legs and shoulders behind the blows. He had pulled off his shirt and the heavy, corded muscles ran like snakes through shoulders and back.

Steve went in to meet him, his body, fined down by hard work, solid bone and steel-wire muscle. He lanced through those hammering fists and sledged right and left to Hulkins' heavy jaw. They were blows that would have felled an ordinary man; the big ramrod simply shook his head and slammed back.

He fought with an unrestrained, animal-like fury and the power in his big body was something to behold. Steve realized that it wasn't boast and brag that had got the big man his reputation but solid fighting ability. His jaw was hard as a rock and he fought with confidence, certain of victory.

Steve met that challenge with a shifting attack. Outweighed by some twenty pounds, he got under some of those air-splitting blows and drove his fists solidly

into the big man's hard, ample belly.

There was no sound save the scuffle of feet on the hard-packed earth; the whistle of air in their heaving chests and the meaty crack of blows.

Steve, battered and pounded by sledge-hammer fists, kept slugging away at Hulkins' belly until it was as red as a piece of raw beefsteak.

He went down from a blow on the side of the head and a groan went up from the crew. But Steve was on his feet before Hulkins could reach him.

Steve felt himself beginning to wilt under that terrific hammering. He put everything he had into a blow that sank his fist wrist deep into the big ramrod's midriff.

Hulkins' huge body shivered from head to heel under its impact and the red went from his face. For an instant, pain and a flicker of doubt obscured the fierce gleam of his eyes, then he tore at Steve again.

But even as Steve reeled under that attack he sensed that the big man's blows were losing some of their power.

The parts of Steve's body that were not numb were one long, fiery ache. Each breath blasted his lungs and bloody sweat trickled into his bruised mouth. Somehow he forced himself to weave in and blast that spreading redness on Hulkins' belly.

With the sodden sound of fists hammering against his middle, the flame died in Hulkins and the desperation of fear showed in his eyes. For the first time he had met a man he couldn't hammer into submission; for the first time he took a backward step.

Steve, feeling the sudden easing of pressure, was after him with all his battered might. He switched to the head and drove the big man back, following on rubbery legs to smash that heavy face apart with piston-like blows.

Hulkins fought back but the heart was gone out of him. Like a sledgehammer that crumbles away bit by bit a rock that is too tough to crack with one blow, Steve followed Hulkins, slowly pounding his face to a bleeding, sodden mass. And when at length the big ramrod's arms dropped, Steve, moving slowly under the weariness that weighted him like a leaden cloak, brought one up from his boot tops with all the weight of his body behind it.

THAT blow lifted all of Hulkins' two hundred pounds an inch clear of the ground and dropped him flat on his back in the dirt. He lay there without movement and Steve stood bent over, sucking air into his lungs in great gulps.

The tenseness went from the crew in a great sigh and Jennifer, in full view of them all, came to Steve and put her arms about him.

The fight had ended almost where it had started and Steve kicked the silver cartwheels over beside Hulkins. "When he wakes up," he told the crew, "tell him to use it to pay his doctor bills."

Old Yard started forward like a man awakening from a trance. "Get away from that damn tumbleweeder!" he roared. "I told him to pull his freight. He's through here."

Jennifer lifted her proudly shining face. "He'll go," she said, "but I'll go with him!"

Old Yard lunged forward like an aged bull and Steve swung around so that he was between him and the girl. His hand went into his pocket and came out holding a shiny metal badge.

"Pull your horns in," he said curtly. "I'm from the Cattlemen's Association. Every one of those vented Circle T cows is stolen stock!"

That rocked Old Yard back on his heels. His hard glance went from the badge to Steve and his face purpled. "That's a damned lie!" he raged. "I give Hulkins the money when he went after 'em—hundred-dollar bills—an' I got a bill of sale to prove it."

He fished a piece of paper from his wallet. Steve glanced at it and handed it back. "It's a fake," he said flatly. "Tracey, owner of Circle T, never signed his name like that in his life."

"I don't believe it," countered Old Yard. "If you was so cock-sure why didn't ye jump us afore this?"

Steve's grin was thin. "I reckoned I'd let you round 'em up for me." He leaned over the fallen Hulkins and while his hands were busy about the man's middle said over his shoulder, "You may be lyin' about payin' for that stock but we'll see."

He straightened up with a leather

money belt in his hands and turned to Old Yard. "Now we'll see." He opened the belt and pulled out a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills.

"Here's your money," Steve said. "Them's rustled cattle and HULKINS double-crossed you."

Old Yard took the money, his face purpling with anger. He looked viciously at his ramrod. "I'll send that light-fingered gent to the pen!"

"Go ahead," Steve said. "It'll save me the trouble."

Old Yard looked at the money in his hand and he looked at Steve with a sly glint in his glassy eyes. "Here," he offered. "You take this cash and I'll keep the steers. That'll close the whole thing out."

"Mister," Steve said flatly, "it'll cost you just five thousand dollars more than you got in your hand to keep them cattle."

That was a bitter dose for Old Yard and he gagged on it but there was nothing he could do. The cars were waiting to be loaded and even at that price he stood to make a fair profit.

"Come down to the bank," he said with a return of his important air, "while I get the money."

"I'm busy," Steve said shortly. "You be back here with the cash in ten minutes or the herd starts back for Circle T."

There were half-suppressed snickers

from the crew as Old Yard swore and started for the bank in a hurry.

"Looks like yuh sorta clipped his horns," Shorty said to Steve and grinned hugely.

When Old Yard returned with the money Steve had his own and Jennifer's warbags tied on the horses. He took the money and scribbled a receipt.

Old Yard stood with the receipt in his hand and watched Steve and the girl swing into the saddles. "You're makin' a mistake," he told his daughter bleakly, "marryin' a no-good stock inspector. One of these days you'll come crawlin' home—and then it'll be too late."

"So long, Pop." Steve grinned at him. "You can send the wedding presents to Circle T."

"Circle T, hell!" said Old Yard bitterly. "From what I hear about Tracey he won't keep you there more'n a minute."

Steve's grin broadened. "I reckon you didn't look at that receipt real well," he said. "I got myself appointed inspector special for this job. Early is my middle name."

He touched spur to flank and the two horses moved off, side by side.

Old Yard looked with puzzled glance at the slip of paper in his hand. Across the bottom, under the "paid in full" was scrawled: *Steve Early Tracey.*



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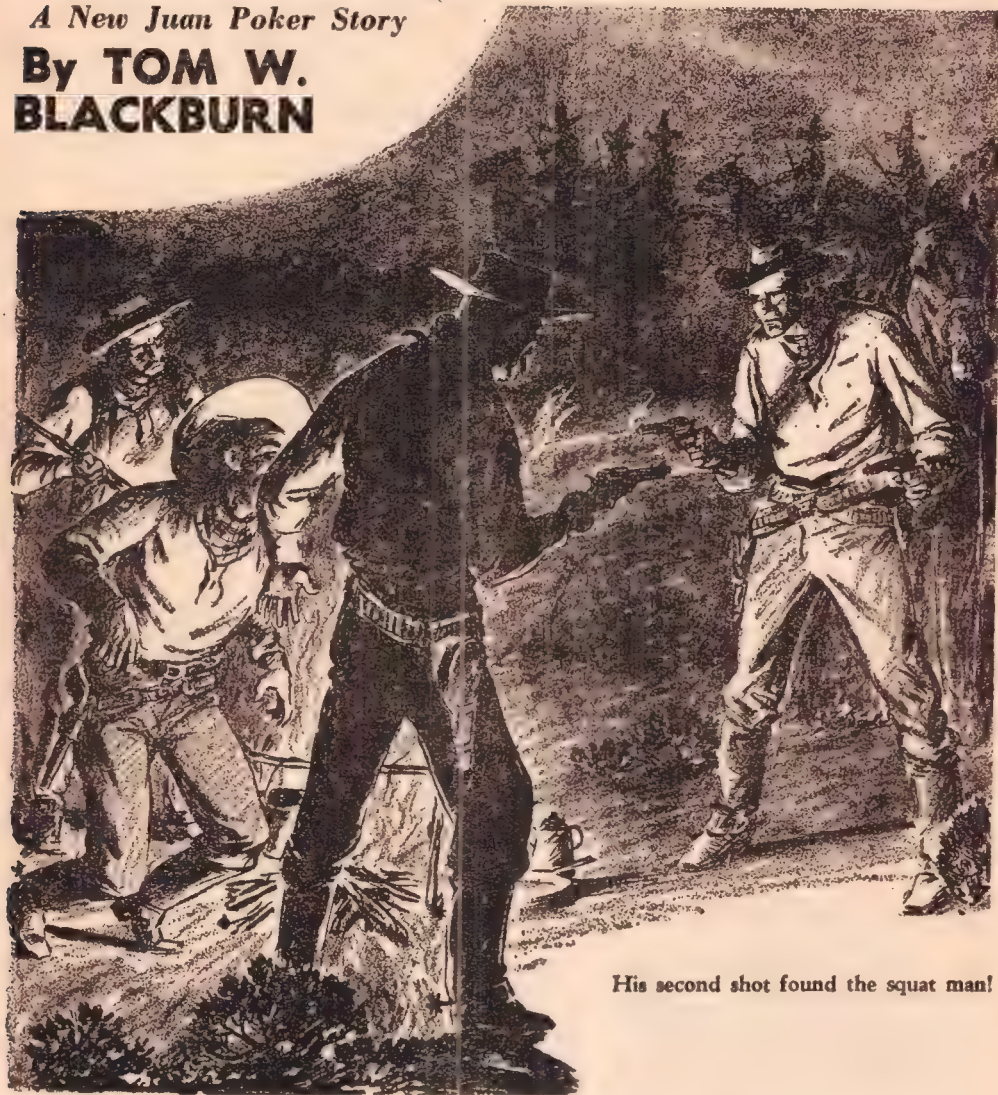
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His second shot found the squat man!

Long John Poker needed an army of vaquero gunslingers to corner the bloodiest cut-throat band that ever scourged the San Joaquin country. But all the fighting force he could muster was a doddering old rancher—and a handful of kitchen maids!

LONG JOHN POKER, half-legendary peacemaker of the Sierras, topped a gentle rise above the San Joaquin River and drew up. Sliding a sectional mariner's glass from a saddle pocket, he focused it and screened the rolling meadowland below. The mellowed tile roof of a sprawling house winked up at him in the dying light. Beyond the house and the gracious gardens which surrounded it, herds of cattle and two bunches of horses were spread on the rich grass.

This was the Herrera rancho, a place of peace and contentment and easy life, thus far untouched by the tide of gold seekers who were overrunning the country to the north and stirring much hatred because they scorned the quiet *Californios*. There was no sign of haste, no indication that all was not as it should be. Poker could see nothing through the lenses to justify the long ride up from San Diego de Alcalá which he had made to bring help to Guillermo Herrera here on the San Joaquin River.

The thing which had started him on his northward ride was a small scrap of gossip, dropped inside the mud walls of a tavern in San Diego. He had heard that the *peons* and *vaqueros*, even the male servants of old Guillermo, had vanished into thin air.

What a thing to occur! Full half of the vanished men were old and honored servants of the house, having served the old man's father before him. But they were gone for a fact. And the poor old man—*ai!* Did he not have a great herd of cattle which must be slaughtered and skinned before the arrival of the hide-ship with which he traded? Did he not have word the ship was on its way? And did he not also have a thousand head of the finest horses in the Californias which needed tending so that they didn't stray into the high mountains behind his rancho? These things to do, and only the hands of himself and his old housekeeper, Tia Luisa, to do them. An impossible matter!

But hear this! On the second day after his men had deserted him, what should ride from those mountains but a dozen *Yanquis*—saddle-men, not diggers for gold. They were bearded and footsore from the long journey from the plains. They listened to Guillermo's troubles and offered themselves to work for him. Not at *Yanqui* wages, but at those he could afford to pay. And more agreeable, still, they would wait for their wages until the hide ship came and the hides were sold and loaded and the gold from their sale was in the rancho money-box. Such fortune! Such luck! And a strange matter when a *haciendado* of the old days is able to hire *Yanquis*! No?

Poker had heard this gossip and immediately saddled his pony. The bearer of

the tale had plainly stated Guillermo Herrera's troubles had solved themselves. But Poker was a skeptical man. Two things in the tale did not fit. Men who had been born on a Sierra rancho, who had served both the father and the son of a family, would not desert. *Californios* were loyal above anything else.

And Yankees from the plains, drawn to the Pacific by wild tales of the easy wealth waiting there, would not hire to an old man for wages less than those they had left. Nor would they trust a stranger in a strange country to withhold their pay after the work which had earned it was finished. Something was wrong on the San Joaquin and John Poker rode north to see.

Yet the scene now below him showed every evidence of being well tended by a crew which knew its business. Still he wasn't satisfied. Dismounting, he stretched behind a deadfall, and using this to steady his glass, he swept the rim again. This time, midway up a feeder canyon half a dozen miles away, he saw something which riveted his attention.

The sky was darkening, but against the light still silvering the air, a dozen lazy specks drifted aimlessly above the slant of the canyon. *Buitres!* Vultures! At the other end of the valley, they would not have attracted Poker's attention. The *matadero* of the rancho, the enclosed ground where the slaughter of cattle and the flaying of hides at shipping time took place, lay in that direction. The vultures fared well there and did their part, clearing the ground of carrion. But there was no *matadero* in this feeder canyon.



AN HOUR after sundown, Poker walked away from a deep brush thicket in the little canyon. It lay in an inaccessible place. His shirt was in ribbons from working his way down into it and back out again. He glanced tight-lipped at the ugly carrion birds which still wheeled and quarreled among themselves above the place. And finally he put his hat, which he had been holding in his hand, back onto his head.

Poker was a strong man, born to a strong stomach and tight nerves. Yet the

thing that thicket hid had shaken him to the center. Bound with their hands behind them, and sprawled in loose heaps, just as they had fallen in the open place centering the thicket under the slugs of a rifleman above, lay the *peons* and *vaqueros* who had worked the Herrerra acres in the old days of sunlight and peace.

Eleven dead men—two were scarcely more than boys and four more were as snow-headed as old Guillermo, himself. Eleven dead men, ruthlessly herded away from the rancho and shot down.

Tight-lipped, John Poker remounted and lined flatly across the valley toward the lights of the Herrerra *hacienda*. . .

* * *

Guillermo Herrerra, white-haired and tall and as stiff-backed as only an old soldier could be, was on the veranda of the spreading house when Poker rode into the compound. He stared in astonishment for a moment, then shouted eagerly:

"Juan! Juanito! Ah, my *Yanqui* friend! Welcome to this house!"

The doors of the big living room burst open and the great bulk of Tia Luisa, the rancho's housekeeper, waddled out, her face wreathed in smiles.

"*Ai! Ai! Señor* Poker! The Good God did not forget us, then! In the old days we have a *fiesta* for your coming. But now—bah!—not even for the return of Juan Poker will Luisa make a *fiesta* for a crew of *Yanqui* dogs! But you are welcome, *Señor*, so welcome?"

Herrerra caught the old woman's arm. "Silence!" he snapped. "The *Yanquis* have been close traders. But they have earned what they ask. I'll have no complaining against them! Into the house with you. A bottle of claret for Juan Poker—from the oldest shelf!"

The old woman turned into the house, muttering maledictions as she went. Poker grinned at her. The *haciendado* moved to a pair of wide chairs set against the inner wall of the cool veranda. He dropped into one, waited until poker eased into the other, then leaned forward.

"The days are quiet along the San Joaquin, Juan," he said curiously. "I did not expect you. What brings you here?"

"Business!" Poker answered.

Herrerra's brows raised in astonishment. A look of half fear crossed his face

—a look Long John had often seen on the faces of the superstitious *peons* who believed many of the legends of mystery and inner sight which followed him along the foot of the Sierra.

"Your kind of business brought you here—to my rancho?" the old man asked. "But this could not be! Until an hour ago I was at peace with a good world. What troubles I've had have solved themselves. And no magic could have carried you word of the new evil which suddenly faced me on this veranda in this last hour! How could it be you knew and came?"

"Nothing that happened an hour ago brought me, *Señor*," Juan Poker said quietly. "Something that happened two months ago warned me trouble was near for you."

"You heard, then, of my hiring of a *Yanqui* crew! But there was no evil in this, alone. How could you, three hundred miles away at Mission San Diego, see the devil in faces when I could not see him when those saddle men were no further from this chair than you now are?"

Poker shrugged.

The old man ran a limp hand over his face. "However it was done, you have guessed rightly, my good friend," he said wearily. "You know this crew which took my hire was to wait for its pay until my herds were slaughtered and flayed and the hides were aboard the Boston ship. To this the *Señor* Graber, who leads them, agreed. I was grateful. The master of the Boston ship and you, yourself, have often told me that there are many *Yanquis*, even among the gold-seekers, who deal honestly. *Señor* Graber must certainly be one of these!

"Word came today that the Boston ship was at anchor, ready to receive my hides. I sent word to *Señor* Graber to start the drive to the coast. But he laughed and brought his men, instead, to my house tonight. They have been working two months. They will work no more without pay. Since I have no money, they will take what they will of my stock. If I protest, they will go to Monterrey and sue with *Yanqui* lawyers there so that I lose even the land of my fathers!

"I am lost, Juan, my son! In other days, when the little ones who deserted me that night two months ago still sang in

my courtyard, I would know what answer to give this *Yanqui*. But an old man alone—*ai!*—there is nothing left me but to bow before their will. They take my horses—all of them. The Herrera strain will be lost to California. And the Herrera rancho must close its doors. For without my horses, and unless my cattle hides are loaded in the time the Boston ship will wait, Guillermo Herrera is a ruined man with nothing left him but the death which waits for the deserted and the dishonored!"



POKER had been leaning indolently back in his chair, letting his mind run through swift and calculating channels of its own. Much of the old *ranchero's* complaint went unheeded by him. But one thing stuck out. He leaned sharply forward.

"Horses?" he grunted. "They're taking your horses?"

Herrerra nodded.

Poker sat back again. That was it, then! He had been troubled about the whole black cloud above these peaceful acres because he couldn't fit this Graber and his men into the thing. They weren't disgruntled miners, weary of the heavy work of the gold creeks. They weren't the even worse brand of wolves who swept the coastal plains under the guise of land speculators. Now he had them placed. In the east the army was buying great herds of fine saddle stock. And there was no finer stock in the world than in these valleys.

Graber and his men had crossed the Utah deserts to drive a herd of California horses to the army market. Their whole play at Herrera's place had been designed to give them a semblance of legal claim to Herrera's herds. They had worked for wages to get the old man under obligation to them. In this way they could rob him blind and still be free of the feeble law sprouting from Monterrey. They had been clever. But there was an answer to be dealt them. And their back pay might suddenly turn to coin they couldn't spend.

"Tomas and Felipe and the rest are gone, you said," he shot at the old man across from him. "But Tia Luisa is here.

And the other women—they are here, also?"

Herrerra nodded. "*Ai!* Old ones and young ones. Perhaps a score at full count. But, Juanito, why do you speak of women when my need is for men!"

"Get them!" Poker snapped tersely. "Dress them as *vaqueros*. Put carbines from your gun-chest in their hands. Saddle good horses for them. Now. Tonight! We'll win back your horses. And we'll load the Boston ship with your hides!"

Herrerra frowned. "In this land our women have strong hearts, Juanito. But they are slender of body and small of hand and they know nothing of guns. They are not *Yanqui* women, used to fighting with their men and for them. This will not do!"

"Women are the same, *Señor!*" Poker said quietly. "The smallest of them will fight for her own roof and for revenge. Your women will be better *vaqueros* than the best of your old crew when I have shown them something tonight!"

Herrerra rose and went toward the house, shaking his head in open doubt. Juan heard him calling orders to Tia Luisa.

Half an hour later, Poker's confidence in his plan had fallen considerably. The company, mounted and armed and equipped, which gathered in the paved courtyard of the Herrera rancho wouldn't have fooled a blind man. True, in the night shadows, they bore a vague resemblance to a company of armed *vaqueros* setting out on an errand. But from the imposing bulk of Tia Luisa, clutching her dead husband's musket, to the slim figure of her granddaughter, sitting lightly in the saddle on a magnificent palomino, all were still women.

Poker looked at them, balanced his uneasiness against the thing he expected of these women, and swung hesitantly to the back of his own horse. For a moment he decided to discard this plan. But he couldn't. Guillermo Herrera had no near neighbors. There was no place from which a party of men could be recruited. And the task ahead required a party, flashing weapons and riding together so that the Yankees mistook the odds against them.

Poker finally shrugged and asked for a sharp axe. When this had been brought

and made fast to his saddle, he wheeled and led out from the house toward the little feeder canyon where the ugly, scab-headed *buitres* had been circling in the evening sunlight.

Coming to the brush thicket, Poker unshipped the axe and made such a passage through it that mounted men—and women—could ride through, catching in passing a swift glimpse of the sprawled bodies heaped in its center.

Tia Luisa and the others rode nervously after him when he led them through the passage he had made. He could hear their complaints at the brush and this ride and the foolishness of Juan Poker. But when they came to the open in the center of the thicket, these sounds died. And when he reached the other side and turned to watch the riders of Herrera rancho reform around him, a great relief ran through his doubts.

In the course of many months of desperate riding through the dun California hills, Juan Poker had been both the quarry and the leader of many companies of men. Grim men with the knowledge he was a tool of justice. Wild men with the sickening fury of a great wrong prodding them forward. Cold men, drained of mercy and compassion and riding like machines on an errand of death.

Yet he had never seen a match for the hot, lethal flames which lighted the taut, grief-wracked faces of the women of Herrera rancho as they rode from that thicket of death. Tia Luisa, gray-cheeked and sitting now like an armored giant in her saddle, crowded her ashen-faced old master out of her way and rode up beside Poker.

"*Vayamos, amigo!*" she croaked.

Poker nodded woodenly. "Yes! We go!"



GUILLERMO HERRERRA hung close to one side of Poker and Tia Luisa to the other on the slanting ride up through the valley toward the shelving mesa where the horse drovers had been camped since their arrival on the rancho. Old Herrera was stunned. He spoke only once, obviously trying to clear his mind.

"My little ones—Tomas and Felipe and the others—herded like cattle to a *mata-dero* and shot down by these swine! Shot down so these murderers could take their tasks and put me into debt to them for two months' wages! I do not understand this!"

Tia Luisa spoke stonily from the other side. "*Ai!* You have been a fool, *patron*, all of us have been fools to think our men would leave this valley for the yellow filth of the gold creeks! Tomas—Felipe—they were men! Men do not run away. And this *Señor* Graber—agh! A clever one. If you owe him wages, he can take the horses with none to stop him. His wages—ah—we'll pay him! We'll pay him well!"

The cavalcade fell silent after this, boring through the night with grim swiftness. Those who had complained most bitterly of the hardness of the saddles now rode with loose recklessness, their eyes reaching ahead toward the glow of the drover's fires. As they rode, Poker made swift reckoning. He doubted if more than half a dozen of the women could be depended upon to understand even the firing of the weapons they carried. And none would be marksmen.

Too, he had no wish to expose any of them to real risk. The people of this rancho had suffered enough hurt at the hands of this crew toward which they now rode. A pitched battle of any sort had to be avoided. And the responsibility lay with Juan Poker. It was much like sitting to a game with a blackleg dealer in which a man watched the fall of blood-stained cards and crowded the stakes with a hand which had the appearance of holding much but which was, in fact, empty. And this, Long John Poker understood.

Coming up onto the crown of the mesa in the deep night shadow, he gave his orders quietly, spreading the women in a silent ring about the camp.

"Give me time to get into the camp. Then ride forward. Come steadily. Keep on coming so long as I am on my feet. If something goes wrong and you see me go down, turn and ride for the rancho without looking back!"

Tia Luisa and the others nodded. Poker left them and started toward the camp, riding at a smart trot. He saw that the

men about the fires were drinking. With a strong respect for the fine brandy the old vintners of California distilled, he was pleased. It took Yankee stomachs many months to stand the impact of that pleasant liquid fire. Men with brandy in their bellies were not apt to see too well.

Back of the camp, bunched against the hills rising solidly there, was a huge herd of horses, likely carefully culled from the Herrera herds by Graber's crew while their old employer imagined they were at the legitimate business of the rancho.

The first sign of the approaching ring about the camp came from the herd. Possibly some of the women had ridden too close to the nervous animals. The stir they raised was a small thing above the raucous talk and laughter in the camp. But two among the drovers caught it, their heads raising sharply. Poker fastened his attention on these two. One of them, he knew, would be Graber, the leader.

Moments later he rose out of the brush into the firelight, himself, coming in toward the fires like a mounted ghost. A man beside the flames squawked and reached for a rifle. A thin, tall man with a heavy beard—one of the two who had sensed the stir among the horses—snapped a sharp command. The man with the rifle eased back, but clung to his weapon. The thin man barked out a warning.

"Light and come in slow!"

Obediently Poker swung from his saddle and walked on afoot, holding on through the scattered fires until he was within a pair of yards of the thin man and standing at such an angle that he could see also both the man with the rifle and the heavier set third man who had heard the noise out in the herd. The thin man was Graber. Poker was so certain of this that he spoke directly into the bearded face:

"I've come for a palaver with you, Graber!"

The thin man showed surprise and his vigilance tightened across his features. "Who the hell are you?"

Poker laughed easily. "Men call me many things. My name is John Poker."

Long John had proof again that this crew was not an overflow from the gold-creeks but had come directly in from the eastern desert. Otherwise Graber would have long ago heard of Juan Poker.

"A drifter, eh?" Graber guessed dryly. "Bumming for a way back to the States. Think you've got a chance to sign on with us when we take this herd of horses back?"

Poker shook his head. Beyond Graber he could see a sifting of shadows. There was movement beyond them. The Herrera women were closing in.

"No," he answered Graber. "And for a good reason, *amigo*! These horses are not going to the States. Neither are any of you. There was a bargain made down at the rancho in the valley. A bargain to drive and slaughter and flay a herd of cattle. That bargain is going to be kept!"

A thin smile pulled at Graber's face. "A damned turn-coat!" he scoffed. "Siding with these no-good farmers against your own kind, eh? I didn't figure the old man would cry to anybody. Thought he was too stiff-backed. You haven't got a leg to stand on, brother. I want my wages. I take them or the horses. That's legal. And one man can't stop me!"

Poker watched the man's smile. "Both of my legs're good!" he snapped. "I had a look in a little feeder canyon across the valley. What I saw there wasn't legal—even in California! And I'm not alone—"

He tipped his head toward the shadows. Mounted figures were bulking against the skyline in a tight ring against the camp. Graber's face had paled at mention of the little canyon and the thing it held. His eyes narrowed when he saw the riders circling the camp. He hung uncertainly

All the world loves a lover—and hates a cheat! You won't know whether to love or hate Gale Taylor . . . for she cheated herself. You'll know why—when you read "Danger—Girl At Work!" by Marian O'Hearn in the current issue of our companion magazine RANGELAND ROMANCES.

for a moment. Then he shouted and reached for his gun.



THIS was the tight place. This would make or break the whole thing. If Graber and his crew could get their guns up and in action, the women would have to run or die. Something swift would have to split their attention and break their nerve before their guns were up.

Juan Poker took a step forward. As he did so, his right gun and then his left freed and came upward. His first shot missed Graber. His second took the squat man beside the leader and spilled him over onto the coals of a fire. The man rolled free of the flames, but he lay motionless after that. Graber drove a slug into Poker's ribs. The right gun spoke again and Graber wilted slowly.

Poker turned a little, cursing silently at a numbness in his fingers from Graber's glancing shot, and smashed a slug into the face of the man who had been clutching a rifle. Across the camp two others leaped to their feet, one swinging a weapon toward the still advancing women. Poker shot twice again, then yelled:

"Drop your guns or I'll signal my crew to cut you to pieces. Drop them!"

A man hesitated. Long John leveled his piece. But he didn't fire. The man's gun dropped into the dust. Others stood up slowly, following suit. Poker moved toward them, herding them beyond the fire so that they stood facing him with their backs to the ring of women.

"Quick, *Abuelo!*" he shouted. "Their guns! Into the fire with them!"

Old Herrera tumbled from the shadows, making a quick circuit of the fires for the weapons there. A few cartridges exploded in the flames as the coals bit into steel and heated chambers hot. Moments later, Herrera, triumphant and grim, was beside Long John, his task finished. Poker turned to him.

"Drive these men to the *mataderos* where the ship is waiting. Let some of the women guard them while the others drive down the cattle. It can be done. And tomorrow, when the sun comes, let these who like butchering so well do the slaughtering and flaying."

The old man nodded. But there was a protest in his eyes. "Yes, it can be done, *Juanito*, and the blessing of the saints on you for it! But afterward, what then? There is bitterness in the hearts of my women. And a great anger. When the work at the *mataderos* is finished and the Boston ship laden, my little ones—even Tia Luisa—will still cry for their revenge. I am one man and cannot stop them. Yet it is not good for the hands of women to be red with blood!"

Long John Poker smiled and leaned close to the old man. "I thought of that, *Abuelo*. Speak to the captain of the Boston ship. The days on the sea are hard ones since gold has been discovered. No ship touches this shore without losing half of it's crew. Speak to the captain and let him take these butchers aboard to carry east again. Tell him what happened in the little canyon—tell him about Tomas and Felipe. He will take better revenge for the dead in that canyon than even your women could. It is three months to Boston by the sea. And three months is a long time for men to live in hell!"

A great, wide smile slowly crossed Guillermo Herrera's lined and weathered face. "Ah, *Juanito!*" he said. "Truly the tales the *peons* whisper about you are no lie. Half man and half beast and half a son of the wicked gods of the high mountains! But you are a friend! Tomorrow there will be sun in my valley again. And tomorrow Luisa will make for you a *fiesta*. There will be wine and a *baile* and much food and singing. For it is not good that even our dead are sad!"

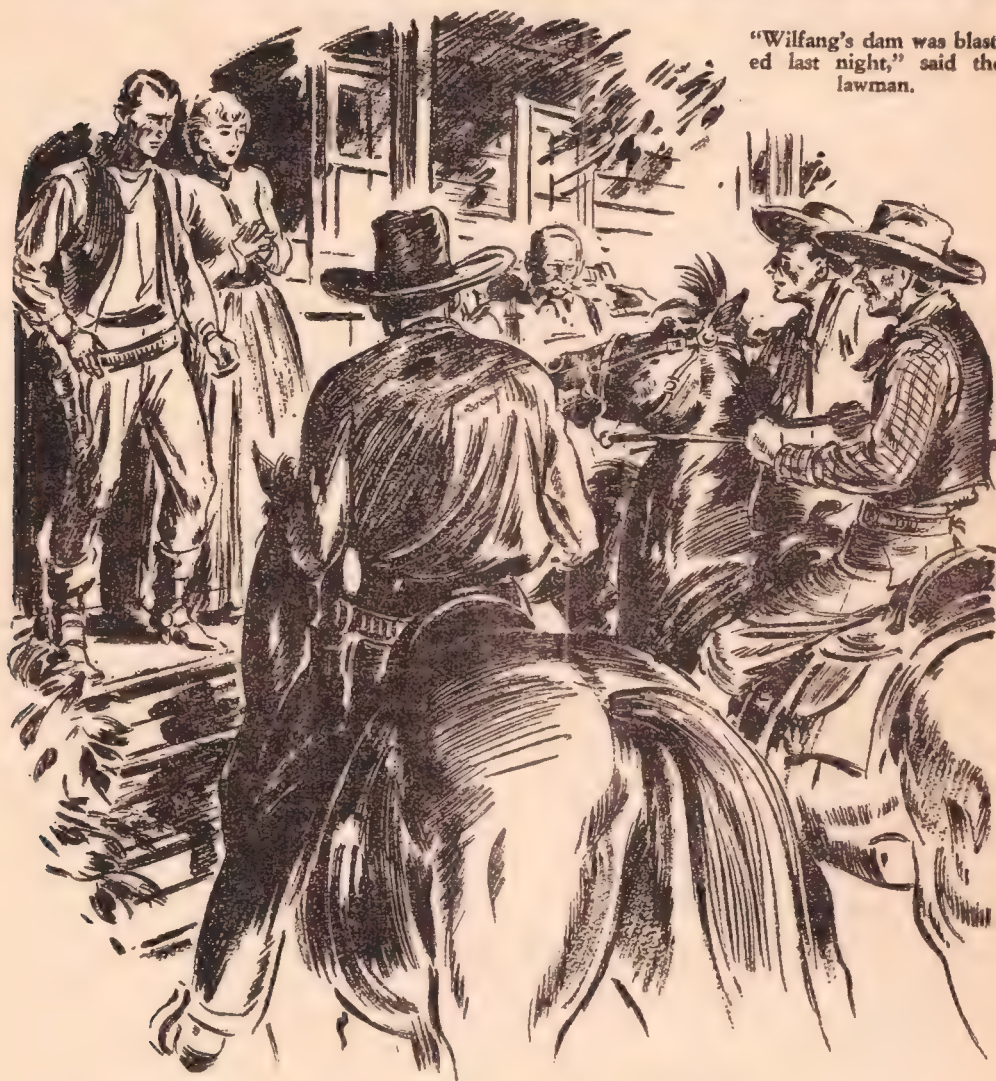
The old man turned away, giving orders with his old sureness.

Juan Poker watched them go, secure in the knowledge that Herrera rancho would neither lose its horses nor miss its shipment of hides. The *fiesta* the old man had promised him was a tempting thing, for Tia Luisa was a famous roaster of meats.

But the day he had overheard a fragment of gossip in a tavern at San Diego de Alcala, he had been about other business. That other business still lay unfinished.

Poker turned his horse silently southward toward the river and the trail to the Camino Real. . . .

THE BATTLING HAS-BEEN



"Wilfang's dam was blasted last night," said the lawman.

By **GUNNISON STEELE**

In Gramp's day they knew how to deal with land-grabbin' varmints—but today was different! . . . A beguiling tale with a dynamite-capped finish.

GRAMP BELL rocked placidly on the shady front porch, but his voice was querulous: "Pestiferous varmint! In my day we knowed how to deal with such land-grabbin' skunks!"

"Now Gramp," Susan cautioned gently.

Gramp snorted, but he stayed quiet, for he'd seen the rider coming along the trail from Argonaut. It was his grandson

John. John's brown face and dark eyes looked grim and worried as he stopped and dismounted out by the corral gate.

Susan put aside her sewing, got up and went out to the corral gate. Gramp watched, rocking gently. He was eighty-two and he'd seen them come and go until now there was just his grandson John, and John's pretty young wife Susan; and the two young ones, of course, Tommy and Sue. He'd long since turned the place over to John to handle, and most of the day he spent just resting in the cool shade and looking back along the trail he'd traveled. In winter he kept to his room.

Trouble with most folks, Gramp said, was they didn't have sense enough to know when to quit. Gramp was old and he knew it, having decided the day five years ago when he forked his last horse. The horse had thrown him against the barn—hurting his pride more than his leg, although he still limped.

"Tonight, at Dave Randall's place," he heard John say. "But meetings won't help. Kurt Wilfang's out to ruin us and grab all he can. That's why he threw the dam across the creek on his place three years ago, waiting for just such a dry summer. Now it's come, and he's squeezin' us. I say it's time to act!"

Gently, Susan said, "No, John. Bother Wilfang's dam and he would send you to prison."

"Then what are we to do?" John asked bitterly. "Just sit here idle and watch our cattle starve, our crops shrivel and die? The creek wouldn't be dry here in the lower valley, even yet, if Wilfang hadn't built that dam."

"But the dam is on his land—and that makes the water behind it belong to him."

"Water belongs to everybody! It was Wilfang's greediness for more land and power that made him do it. He wants to buy our cattle at two dollars a head, our land at a fourth its value. He don't believe in letting the other fellow, the little fellow, live and work and be happy."

Gramp had never seen John quite so angry. He got up reluctantly and went to the near end of the porch and stood listening to John.

"If the law says we've got to stand for such as this, then the law's no good. We've worked from daylight to dark, all of us,

and for what?" John was riled some.

Susan looked across the dry creek, at their scorched acres, and murmured, "Maybe it will rain—"

"It won't, not in time. But with water in the creek, right now, there'd still be time to irrigate and save our feed. A keg of blasting powder under that dam and—"

"And you'd go to the pen," Gramp said sharply. "That idea's bad, John, so don't think about it. Wilfang's top wolf now—but he'll wind up bad, like they nearly always do. In my day I saw it happen lots of times."

"But we're supposed to have laws—"

"That's just it," Gramp said. "We got laws, and if Wilfang proved you blasted his dam you'd go to the pen. Then what? When you get old as me you'll know not to do things too quick. You go on to that meetin' at Randall's tonight, and take Susan and the young 'uns with you. Maybe you can figure somethin' out."

Hardly anybody ever argued with Gramp. John said, "We'll take the wagon and get an early start. But I aim to press for action. . . ."

Gramp sat back down in the rocker and watched awhile later as John hooked a pair of duns to the wagon. It was one of the duns, then a young saddlehorse, that had thrown him against the barn. He never went near a horse now; just looking at one reminded him of his senility.

As she and the youngsters got into the wagon, Susan warned, "You be careful, Gramp, and go to bed early."

Grumpily, he said, "I been here a long time, and I always got along, didn't I?" He watched as they drove away toward the lower valley.

Gramp sat there till the sun was nearly down, rocking gently and thinking. Kurt Wilfang, the biggest and richest rancher in the basin, was trying to starve the valley into submission with his thousands of barrels of stored water. Stolen water, Gramp thought sourly. Maybe John's idea hadn't been so far wrong, at that. He could remember a time. . . . But that was long ago, when his blood was quick and warm.

That was back when he asked no odds of any man—nor any horse, either. Before he quit getting more than a hundred

yards from the house, for fear he'd die some place other than in his own comfortable bed. That was one thing Gramp had his mind set on—dying in his own bed.

Gramp looked about and saw that it was getting dark, his usual bed time. He got slowly up and went inside.



AN HOUR after sunup the next morning, three riders crossed the creek from the north and stopped out front. Gramp was already in his rocker on the porch; he looked interestedly at the riders, at their horses' wet legs and bellies where they'd crossed the creek. One of the men was Sheriff Conly from Argonaut, another his deputy; and the third—the big, blond, scowling man—was Kurt Wilfang.

John came out, and Susan, too, and they listened to what the sheriff had to say.

"Wilfang's dam was blasted last night, Bell, as you know," the sheriff said. "The creek's half bankful from there to the lower end of the basin. Wilfang had been afraid that would happen, so he had a guard on the dam. But whoever done it was pretty slick; he sneaked up behind the guard and slugged him with somethin' heavy. We know it was just one man. We found where he'd left his horse in a thicket, then sneaked up on the guard. He must have used a lot of powder under the dam."

John nodded. "We heard the explosion, all the way to Randall's. When we got home the creek was already nearly

bankful. But why did you come here, Sheriff?"

"Because we followed the dynamiter's horse's trail," said the sheriff. "We followed it here, right up to the far side of the creek over there."

"If you mean you think it was me that done it," John said quickly, "I can prove I didn't. Susan and me, along with most of the valley, were at Randall's place when it happened. I can prove that. Wasn't a soul on the place but Gramp."

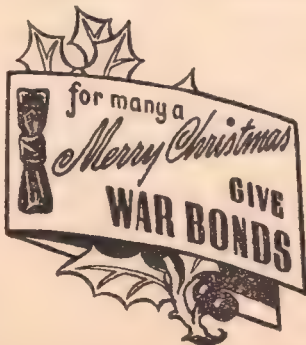
The sheriff looked at Gramp's quiet figure there on the porch. He was quiet a moment, and then he said: "I can't buck an alibi like that. Fact is, I knew you didn't do it; I knew you were at Randall's when it happened. But that trail—well, I reckon that was just another one of the dynamiter's slick tricks. You satisfied, Wilfang?"

Wilfang growled, "Satisfied Bell didn't do it, I reckon."

Pretty soon, they rode away.

John looked at the cows standing belly-deep in the sparkling creek water. Then he went slowly into the tool shed and opened a box where he always kept a supply of blasting powder. When he came out again he went to where Susan stood. He said nothing, but stood there with her, and they both were smiling as they watched the young ones splashing in the cool water.

Gramp, rocking gently, was smiling too. He felt pretty good. "Sometimes a feller makes up his mind too quick," he muttered. "Way I see it now, a man ain't dead till he's buried. And, by ding, next chance I get I aim to have me another whirl at that dun!"



The Christmas present

with a future—

A War Bond!

KING OF THE

Dramatic Novelette



Curly flung himself at
the fence . . .

That unruly Curly button of Gawdamighty Reagan's was set to wreak vengeance on a watermelon-eating wild hog. Old Reagan was for taking a switch to the button's hide to put some savvy in his jughead skull—but Shinery Red figured that a hot head was best cooled by a personal meeting with a wily old tusker!

WILD COUNTRY

of an Untamed Button



By
**FRED
GIPSON**

CHAPTER ONE

Wild-Hog Jackpot

THERE were no halfway measures about old Gawdamighty Reagan's button Curly. When that rusty-headed, freckle-faced fourteen-year-old went at a thing, he did it whole-hog with no holds barred. Even to throwing a spoiled brat's mad fit.

He was throwing himself a woolly-booger fit this morning. He lay flat on his belly in a tangle of watermelon vines and beat the red soil of the field with his fists. He kicked it with the toes of his boots. Now and then he squalled like a trapped wildcat and in between times he swore man-sized oaths in a shrill kid voice that carried a quarter of a mile.

Pumpkin-bellied old Gawdamighty Reagan was running a trot-line in a catfish hole down under the high bluff on Beaver Creek. He was in the water up to his armpits when he heard the kid. He didn't wait to get his clothes. He hurled a tow sack of catfish toward the bank. He followed it with his bait can of spring frogs and hellgrammites, then swam toward the opposite side of the hole. He quit the water and went in a waddling run up the steep rocky trail leading to his hill-side corn patch.

He threw down the wire gap to the field and left it open in his hurry. He planted a tender white foot on a nest of goat-head sandburrs, gasped at the pain, but kept going. He was knocking ears of corn off the stalks like a runaway plow horse when he broke into the opening where Curly's watermelon patch ran the length of the field.

Curly still lay face down in the watermelon vines. He still beat the ground with his fists and cursed in a high shrill voice. Old Gawdamighty stopped his charge and stood panting, staring down at his enraged off-spring. The wild protective urge that had panicked him into the run slowly drained out of him, replaced with thorough disgust.

"Gawdamighty damn, Curly!" he exploded suddenly. "What'n the tarnation's this all about!" He reached out a caloused hand to grab Curly by his shirt collar and yank him to his feet.

Curly twisted out of his grip and stepped away to turn and stare at his father. Savage desperation gleamed in the kid's tear-filled eyes.

"If you ain't a purty sight now," said old Gawdamighty, disregarding his own appearance. "A-wallerin' in the dirt like a five-year old with conniption fits. What's the meaning of all this?"

Curly raked at the teary mud on his cheeks with his shirt sleeve and his chin quivered. "Look at my watermelons!" he said, waving an arm dramatically. His fourteen-year-old boy's voice cracked and rose shrilly. "Jist look at 'em!"

Old Gawdamighty lifted a bare foot to extract a burr and looked. All up and down the row, he could see where vines had been shoved aside and trampled on. Here and there the rattlesnake stripe of a half-grown melon still gleamed in the sun. But where once there had been huge ones ripening, there were now only trampled bits of rind and scattered seeds and the dark spots where the sand had soaked up the luscious juice.

"Why—why, there's been hogs in my corn!" exclaimed the old man in consternation. "Damned if there ain't."

"In your corn!" cried the outraged Curly. "In my watermelons! It was just one hog. But he got my show melon, Pa. The one I aimed to take the prize with at the county fair next Saturday."

Instantly, old Gawdamighty was all sympathy and kindness. He placed an arm around the kid's thin shoulders and drew him close. "Now, now. Don't take it so hard, Curly," he said clumsily.

Curly pulled away from him. "Don't take it hard," he flared. "Hell's fire, Pa. I nursed that watermelon like it was a baby. I packed a thousand buckets of water from the creek yonder, keeping it watered in dry spells. I worked it and the rest of this patch when I could a-been fishin' or cat-huntin'. I slept with the thing damn nigh prayed for it. I had it weighing better'n eighty pounds. And now look at it. Et up in five minutes by one damn' fence-breaking wild hog!"

"Yeah, I know, son," said Gawdamighty. "I watched you a-workin' with that melon. I knowed you was all set to take the blue ribbin with it. But that's how it is sometimes, son. A man's luck runs out on him and there ain't nothing he can do about it. Maybe next year—"

"The hell there ain't nothing I can do!" squalled Curly. "I'll git that damned hog. You wait and see. I'll run him to ground and I'll cut piggin' strings out of his ornery hide. Then I'll stick him and leave him for buzzards!"

"Now, tuck in your shirt-tail, baby," said old Gawdamighty in alarm. "You gotta learn to halter your temper and take things like a man. You—"

"Baby!" shrieked the indignant Curly. "So you figure I'm still a baby, huh. Well, I'll show you whether I'm a baby or not. I'll bring you in a wad of piggin' strings that'll last you a year. And I'll cut them out of a live hog's hide when I do it." He broke and ran into the corn, headed for the house.



OLD Gawdamighty Reagan stood there and scratched his belly moodily. When it came to managing his boys, Curly and Shinery Red, he felt as helpless as a wooden-legged widow at a young folks dance. His Mary had died at Curly's birth and since that time, he'd tried to be both mother and father to the boys, but he guessed he hadn't made much of a job of it. Neither was mean but both were bronc-headed and high-tempered, hard to manage.

He sighed and picked his way out of the field and back down to his trot-line in the catfish hole. He was dragging on his clothes when Curly came spurring out of the corrals on a high-headed black horse that old Gawdamighty had told him not to ride.

The kid put the snorty black into the crossing at a reckless pace that made old Gawdamighty's heart leap to his throat. Those rocks in that creek were slick and treacherous. One misstep and a horse would swap ends with himself and it'd be a miracle if the rider came out alive. But the horse made it safely across. He took out up the rocky trail at a buck-jumping

run that had Curly's loose shirt-tail flopping in the wind.

Two of the hog dogs, Coalie and Liverpill, led the run, and behind raced Half-Pint, the bench-legged fice, straining to keep up. Eager for a chase, the three dogs yelped every time their feet hit the ground.

Shinery Red, Gawdamighty's older son, came riding down the creek on a crab-walking bronc with rollers in its nose. The big rawboned bronc-peeler hauled back on the hair-rope hackamore, pulling the nervous bronc to a halt.

"Who lit a fire under Curly's tail?" he wanted to know.

Gawdamighty told him. "And now that Curly's throwed him a big mad fit," he wound up, "damned if I know what to do with him."

Shinery Red threw back his head and laughed. "Hell, don't do nothing, Pa," he advised. "Curly's all right. He'll grow up one of these days—just like I done!"

Gawdamighty grinned faintly in remembrance. "You was a heller, all right," he agreed, "till old Nevershed Anderson's gal Gracie tamed you some. But you was always big and stout, Shinery. That Curly, he ain't no bigger'n the little end of nothin' whittled down to a fine point. If he tangles with some old scalawag bar' hog, he's liable to git his belly cut open to his backbone. Hurt and mad like he is over losing that prize watermelon, he's all fight and no judgment."

Shinery Red grinned. "Go on up to the house and set with your whiskey jug, Pa," he comforted. "I'll tail Curly and keep him from gittin' hog et."

At the corn-field gap, Curly hauled down the fractious black to a walk and began circling the net-wire fence old Gawdamighty had built to keep the goats and range hogs out of his corn field. The kid was hunting the break in the fence where that melon-raiding hog had shoved through. He found it on the far side of the field where a gully ran under the fence.

A short log and some brush had been thrown in the opening as a blind, but that old scalawag hog hadn't been fooled. He'd run his long snout under the log and rolled it aside, then pushed on through the brush. The sign showed that he'd come back out the same way.

Liverpill, the blue-spotted hound, needed no urging to pick up the trail. He circled a time or two, made sure he wasn't back-trailing, then led off at a fast run, bawling his head off. The black shepherd Coalie joined him, running silently. Half-Pint, the catch-dog, jerked his tail into a coil-spring twist and yipped along behind, awaiting developments. The vengeance-hungry Curly cursed the prancing black in one breath and yelled encouragement to the dogs in the next.

The run didn't last long. The dew was still on the ground, making the scent easy to follow. Also, the marauding hog hadn't considered it worth the effort to travel far on a melon-gorged paunch. He'd holed up in a live-oak and bee-myrtle thicket back of the field where he figured he was safe and was fast asleep.

He aroused himself with a grunt at the first sound of the bugle-mouthed hound, but he made no move to quit the dense thicket. He was an old hog and had been run by catch-dogs before. He knew he was in just the sort of tight nest he needed for a stand-off fight, so he backed up to the net-wire fence and stood his ground, rumbling throatily.

Hot on his trail, Coalie and Liverpill plunged headlong into the thicket. An explosive burst of sound warned them just in time. They slid to a quick halt in the leaves and turned tail quickly. They'd run plenty of wild hogs in their time and had learned the hard way about crowding a vicious old tusker in a thicket where there wasn't room for a quick getaway.

They came back out into the opening with their tails tucked. Not three feet behind them charged a huge black boar, popping his teeth angrily.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tusker Pays Off

THE hog got a glimpse of the approaching Curly and retreated, taking up his stand against the fence again. Curly saw him and instantly urged the dogs back into the thicket. That boar had the longest tusks Curly had ever seen on a hog.

Freaks, Curly guessed. They curled out and up from his jaws and then hooked

over again in front of his eyes, almost meeting. They made him look as savage and dangerous as any wild beast had a right to look, but at the same time, they rendered the boar virtually helpless. Curled up like those tusks were, that old hog couldn't have cut his mark on the side of a tree. He could thrust and stab all he pleased and he couldn't break the hide on a dog.

The dogs couldn't understand this, and were reluctant to take chances in such close quarters. They circled the thicket, baying noisily. It took a lot of urging and swearing on the kid's part to get them back into the brush. Gradually, however, they began to close in.

Curly downed his rope and reefed the black down both hips to set him up on his toes. Then he built him a loop to fit and got ready. When the dogs crowded that old boar out into an opening, the kid aimed to latch him. Half-Pint made the first attempt at a catch. Silently, he crept closer and closer while the boar's attention was fixed on the bigger dogs. He waited till the hog was turned broad-side to him, then lunged in, grabbing for a ham-hold. He got it and sank his teeth deeply, at the same time throwing his weight around in a fashion calculated to pull the big boar off balance.

The fice made a mighty pretty job of his catch, all right, but he hadn't reckoned with the net wire fence just beyond. His lunging body swinging away from the hog hit the taut wires and rebounded, killing the effect of his throw.

The boar whirled on him with a roar. Half-Pint screeched in mortal terror. The lightning-quick thrusts of the old boar's tusks were calculated to disembowel—and the dog knew it.

It was only the long, freakish curve of the ivory blades that saved the fice. The points never did touch him. The hog pivoted to meet the attack of the older dogs and the fice got his feet under him again. He didn't wait around for more. He quit the thicket on flying short legs, yipping frantically, with his tail gripping the underside of his belly.

Meanwhile, a savage lunge of the old boar had knocked Coalie off his feet. The shepherd was uninjured but rolling too fast to realize it. The boar caught the

hound against the wire and made a run at him.

Liverpill barely escaped the fate of the fice. He fell sideways, yelping in fear. The wires creaked in the post staples when the hog hit the fence. He lunged back to renew the attack, but suddenly couldn't. The upthrusting lick he'd made at the hound had run one of those tusks through the fence. A wire had slipped inside the hook of that tusk and the down-pull of the hog's weight merely held it tighter. The big boar hog had trapped himself.

Curly was already down out of his saddle. He'd had it figured that the dogs would make a catch and save him the trouble of trying to rope the old scalawag in the brush. Now, he hurried in, grinning, jerking a rawhide tie-string out of his belt. All he had to do now was throw that big helpless fighter and tie him down. He hollered at the frantic dogs, calling them off.

Maybe it was the sound of his voice that did it. Or maybe the old boar had just been too surprised at being caught to make a real effort at releasing himself. Anyhow, when Curly hollered, the big boar flung himself backwards, throwing all of his two hundred pounds of live weight against the one small strand of steel wire holding him.

The wire stretched, but held. The long, hooked tusk didn't. Curly heard a sound like the snapping of bone and looked up to see the boar free and lunging about to charge him. And what froze the blood in the kid's veins was the sight of one of the big boar's tusks. It had snapped off against the wire, leaving a four-inch splinter that was now as sharp pointed and deadly as a Mexican puñal.

Curly Reagan wasn't a kid to panic in a tight. He had only one chance of coming out of this scrape without getting cut to pieces by a wild hog and he saw it instantly. He knew he couldn't outrun that hog, even in open ground. There was no chance of dodging him in thick brush like this.

All he could do was wait for the charge and keep a head cool enough not to jump too soon. Curly figured that one in a flash of disconnected thought and steeled himself to stand his ground.

The board charged with an explosive, challenging roar. At the last possible instant, Curly leaped straight up, spreading his legs wide. The boar went under him, cutting high.

The slashing splinter of tusk sliced Curly's boot top through to the hide and brought a little blood. But the kid didn't wait around to examine his wound. He came down and flung himself bodily into the thick tangle of brush, making for the fence.



HE WENT up on the fence where he struck it. He found himself in the middle of a long span of wire between two cedar posts, but there was no time for changing places. The enraged boar had heeled about the instant he'd realized he'd missed and was charging again.

The kid jerked his feet up out of danger just in time. The hog hit the fence under him and rebounded. The wire, now top-heavy with the weight of the kid, swayed out over the hog. For an instant, the kid lost all hope as the big savage brute whirled, cutting high with that broken tusk.

Then the pendulous wire swung slowly back in the opposite direction. The kid flung himself free, landing flat on his back in a patch of sandburrs growing inside the field.

The rattled Curly got to his feet and stared at the angry boar. Bristles standing on end, the big brute stood on the opposite side of the fence and stared at Curly. The dogs hung back at a safe distance, bluffed and routed. They kept up a half-hearted baying while the black horse started toward the house, holding his head high and sideways to keep from stepping on the reins.

"Whoa!" Curly shouted at the horse.

The horse moved away faster. The kid started down the inside of the fence at a dog-trot, aiming to climb over and cut in ahead of the black. The irate boar followed him, popping his frothy teeth and daring the kid to come over to his side of the fence.

Curly bent down and picked up a fist-sized chunk of red sandstone. He hurled it through the wires, striking the boar in the ribs. The big hog leaped aside with a coughing roar, then charged the kid. The fence hurled the hog back, but there was a big slack belly left in the wire that would require lots of stretching to pull out.

Curly called on the dogs then, whistling to them and talking it up big, urging them to make a catch. He had to get out of this field and get his hands on that black horse before the fool made it to the house.

Curly had made his brags about catching that hog and if that black horse got away and went in with an empty saddle, Gawdamighty and Shinery Red would laugh him off the place. There'd be no living with them for months.

Urged by the kid, Coalie and Liverpill crowded closer and bayed louder. But they weren't mixing with that hog in the thick brush.

Curly saw how it was and went into another temper frenzy. He cussed the dogs. He cussed the hog. He cussed the black horse. Then he turned, running through the corn toward the other side of the field. If he hurried, he might get out and catch that black horse before he reached the house.

Curly hurried, but he didn't catch the horse. When he vaulted over the fence close to the gate, he saw the black going off the hump of the hill down into the creek canyon.

At the same moment, he saw Shinery Red ride out of the brush. The big raw-boned peeler was rocking and reeling in

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his saddle, bawling his loud laughter.

"If that wasn't a sight to watch and remember," he whooped. "Wait'll I tell Pa how you riz and flew to the top of that fence with that old hog cuttin' the grease outta the seat of your britches. I never seen the beat of it."

Sheer panic hit the kid at first, then gradually faded, leaving a cold, merciless anger that turned his eyes the color of green glass slits reflecting the sunlight.

"I reckon," he said in a dangerous tone, "that you just set in your saddle, laughing, without turning a hand."

"That's right," said Shinery Red. "I aimed for that old hog to learn you a lesson, kid. How to hold your temper down."

Curly still clutched a chunk of mesquite limb in his right hand. He'd picked it up on his run through the corn field, aiming to wade into that old boar with it, in case the proddy devil was there to jump him when he came over the fence. Suddenly, he drew back the club, squalled his rage, and let fly at his big brother's head.

The startled Shinery fell half out of the saddle, dodging the whizzing chunk of wood. It was too much for the jughead bronc he rode. The spooky booger had been hunting an excuse to unload his rider and this looked like his chance. He snorted, bogged his head, and quit the ground with the saddle skirts rattling.

Shinery Red clawed frantically for leather to drag himself back into the saddle. He got it, but the hard pitching bronc kept moving away from him too fast. He never could pull himself erect. On the third jump, the jug-head shed the peeler, snapping him loose from the saddle and piling him on his shoulders in a catclaw bush. Then the wall-eyed creature took out down the trail to the creek, pitching and bawling and slinging loose stirrups high.

Curly watched his big redheaded brother drag himself out of the catclaw bush. The peeler's hat was gone. His shirt was in shreds. A patch of hide had been knocked off his nose and his face and hands bled from a thousand thorn scratches.

Curly grinned maliciously. "I aimed," he said, "for that to learn you a lesson, you big blow-hard. How to set around

and laugh your fool head off while a damn wild hog is trying to cut the guts out of your own blood and kin!"

With that, Curly turned and headed down the trail, following the runaway horse. He felt some better now.

The dogs had quit the hog soon after Curly left them. The kid caught up his horse and rode back down to the creek, where he found Coalie and Liverpill cooling their bellies in the water. The fice was nowhere in sight.

The kid called the dogs out of the water and headed for the thicket again. The hog was gone. He'd evidently taken to the hills, aiming to clear out.

CHAPTER THREE

Curly Gets a Ropeful...

SOME three miles back in the roughs, the dogs brought the boar to bay a second time. But, as before, he'd picked his spot in which to make his stand. He'd backed up under an overhanging lip of rock in the curving bed of a dry wash. The bank protected his sides and his rear, while a stand of scrub cedar a few yards out in front shielded him from Curly's rope and discouraged a direct frontal attack by the dogs.

The big boar knew he had him another tight nest and he walked proudly back and forth on tip-toe, roaring his defiance. He'd routed this bunch once and he was plenty riled. He snapped suggestively at thin air, popped his vicious teeth and boldly dared the outfit to wade in any time they could rake up enough guts.

The dogs kept their distance and so did Curly. The kid knew as well as the dogs that to crowd that old tusker in such a spot would be suicidal. He'd cut them all to scrap meat.

The kid rode around the hog, trying to find a point of vantage where he could make use of his rope. He cursed the animal in a savage undertone but couldn't help feeling a slight admiration for the sagaciousness of the old devil.

The kid got down and tied his horse to a live-oak sapling. He told himself that fool horse would play hell making him walk home a second time. Then he took down his catch-rope and climbed the ledge.

"Git him, Coalie!" he shouted. "Crowd him, boy!"

He didn't expect the dogs to charge the boar. All he wanted was for them to crowd in close enough for the boar to charge them. He stood there on the ledge with his loop cocked.

The trick worked. The big boar saw the dogs pressing closer through the cedars. He thought he saw a chance to get in a killing lick; he quit the protection of the overhanging rock in a lightning-swift charge.

Curly's loop whipped out and over the animal like a live thing, settling down across his shoulders and between his fore legs. Curly hauled back on the rope to take up the slack. He had him a wild hog caught!

The trouble was that Curly had made a bigger catch than he could handle. There was mighty little tallow on the scrawny kid's bones; he didn't pack enough weight to stop the hog's charge. The big tusker hit the end of the rope like a runaway train, dragging the kid off the bench.

Curly landed face-down in the sandy wash.

Frantic with terror, half-blinded by the stinging sand in his eyes, the kid scrambled to his feet. But the enraged hog had already wheeled. Curly tried to leap out of the path of the hog's murderous charge and knew the wild horror of being too late and too slow. The roaring hog hit him, knocking the kid's feet higher than his head.

It was the kid's loud scream of terror that brought in the dogs. That cry aroused in them a protective instinct that no fear could quell. They came roaring in, swarming over the hog with a raging, savage fury that disregarded all consequences.

The fight whirled all around the kid, knocked him down when he got to his feet, and raged over him. He rolled from under, coming to his feet with sand in his mouth and eyes, and the stench of hot blood and dust clogging his nostrils.

But the dogs had no chance in such close quarters. Above the battle roar of the wild hog, the kid heard Coalie's wild screech of pain. Like one in a horrible dream, Curly stood and watched the black shepherd come rolling out of the boiling

dust. The dog landed against a bush, where he lay flat on his back with a slashed and bleeding belly laid open to the hollow.

A second later, the hound was caught against the ledge and cut down. Curly barely leaped to one side in time to escape the unchecked charge of the killer hog.

The boar didn't stop his charge to whirl again. Before him was the black horse, snorting and plunging and falling back against the reins tied to the live-oak. To the riled boar, the horse was just another enemy in his path.

If he expected an easy victory here, the big hog got a surprise. The black saw him coming and squatted. Then with a squeal of terror, he lashed out with both heels. An iron-shod hoof struck the side of the hog's head and popped against the bone with a sound like a pistol shot.

The hog went down, rolling as the dogs had rolled. He lay still for an instant, then struggled slowly to his feet. A moment later, he staggered into the brush, swaying and weaving like a Saturday-night drunk.



WHEN Curly rode in home along the middle of the afternoon, he looked to old Gawdamighty like something the hounds had dragged out of a hollow log. His clothes were dirty and hanging in strings and he was bloody as a stuck hog. He rode with the bridle reins clamped between hard-set teeth and packed a bleeding dog under each arm.

Gawdamighty gasped:

"You hurt bad, Curly?"

"It ain't me, Pa," said the kid. "The devil hit me with the wrong tusk. It's the dogs. They pitched in to save my damn-fool hide and they're cut all to hell. See if you can locate a spaying needle and some catgut while I take the saddle off this horse."

The old man hurried off to the house. When he came back with the necessary equipment, Curly held the dogs while the old man did the sewing. Best they could tell, the black shepherd's wound, terrible as it looked, was a clean cut. None of the entrails had been punctured. With

any kind of luck, the dog would be up and around in less than a week's time.

The hound's wound was another matter. The broken tusk of the hog had caught him at the point of the shoulder and driven deep before tearing out through the neck muscles. The jugular vein hadn't been cut, else the dog would already have been dead. But there was no way of telling what serious injuries the dog had suffered deeper in. All they could do was sew up the ugly gash, leaving a lower corner of the wound to drain, and hope for the best.

The dogs winced and whimpered when the big needle pierced the raw lips of their wounds, but neither lost their heads and tried to bite. Instead, they licked Curly's hands.

That's what got under the kid's skin. The way those two valiant dogs lay there and licked his dirty hands. He'd lost his temper, acted the rattle-brained, bald-faced kid that Gawdamighty and Shinery Red knew him to be, and got himself in a jackpot. And the dogs had had to pay for it. They'd pitched in to save him where they knew they didn't have a chance.

Tears streamed out of the kid's eyes and he didn't bother to wipe them away.

They carried the dogs to the screen-wire meat house where the blow-flies couldn't get to them. They made them comfortable beds out of tow sacks, brought them water, and then left them alone.

Curly went to the house and built a supper fire in the cook-stove. Gawdamighty trailed him like an old hen with one chicken.

"I'll send Shinery out after that boar hog with a Winchester tomorrow," he said uneasily. "If I could hit the side of a house with the doors shut, I'd go myself."

"Listen, Pa," Curly said grimly. "This difference is between me and that boar hog. You keep Shinery Red out of it. You keep yourself out of it. I said I'd git that big devil and I'll git him. But now it ain't because of them watermelons he et. It's for what he done to old Coalie and Liverpill."

In the next three days the kid didn't say three unnecessary words. He hung

right with the wounded dogs, watering them and doctoring their wounds till old Gawdamighty had to call him down on it.

"You'll worry 'em with too much attention," he pointed out. "And don't keep in such a lather about them dogs gittin' cut up on account of you. They done what they figured they had to do. Every critter's got something he thinks enough of to die for. Coalie and Liverpill wouldn't of had it no other way."

Best they could tell, the hound was worse on the fourth day. The dog lay stretched out on the floor of the meat house, hot with fever and barely breathing.

By the middle of the afternoon, Curly could stand it no longer. He caught up the high-headed black and saddled him, then hit for the hills.

He was back up Mud Springs Hollow when he ran across a worm-infested shoat. The tormented creature came reeling down the trail to meet him, trying to make it to water, but too blinded by pain to see where he was going. All one ear and one eye had been eaten out by the maggots that kept boring deeper and deeper into its head. Blood trickled down its snout and dripped into the trail. He wouldn't last much longer without doctoring and the kid knew it.

Curly didn't bother with a rope. He stepped down off his horse and caught the pig by its hind leg. He bound its feet together with a piggin' string.

Loading the squealing pig on the nervous black was another matter, however. The horse fell back against the reins and pawed the air every time Curly approached with the wounded animal. Curly lost his temper and cussed him and tried to haul him around to where he could get a foot in the saddle stirrup. It was no use.

Curly saw that the black didn't aim to let him get back in the saddle. He stared around him. His eye lit on a broken black-jack snag, about head high, that stuck out over the trail. He picked up the shoat and hung its crossed feet over the snag. Then he mounted.

The black was still snorty, but the pig had quit squealing and Curly managed to spur the horse in under the pig. Gently he lifted it down and hung it on the saddle horn. But at the first movement of the

horse under him, the pig let out another terrified squeal. That's when the show opened.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Ring-Tailed Tooter!

THE black snorted and leaped ten feet to one side, landing in the fallen top of a dead Spanish oak. He stumbled, falling almost to his knees, then righted himself and reared straight up. Curly doubled his fist and hit the black a blow between the ears, trying to knock him back down. He couldn't hit hard enough.

Too late, he saw that the black was coming over backwards on him. He tried to quit the saddle but his right spur hung in a crooked branch of the treetop, holding him. A spasm of fear shot through him. He'd be crushed to death beneath the rearing horse. He kicked frantically to free his leg, pulling half out of the saddle on the other side.

They landed with a grunt and a crash of breaking branches. The saddle-horn gouged into the ground beside Curly's ribs, but held the weight of the horse off the boy. Then the black rolled sideways, pinning Curly's leg under him.

It was the first time Curly had ever had a horse down on him. But it wasn't the first time he'd ever seen one down on a man. Shinery Red broke horses for a living and he'd told the kid over and over what to do in a case like that.

"Grab the saddle-horn and hold him down," Shinery Red had said. "If you ever let him go, he'll stomp you to death gittin' his feet under him."

The struggling black tried to roll to his feet. Curly grabbed the saddle-horn with both hands and just barely had enough weight to hold the animal down. The black's flailing feet shattered the dead Spanish oak top, clearing the brush away and filling the boy's eyes and mouth with shattered bark and dust. But Curly held grimly to the saddle-horn.

Finally the horse ceased its struggles and the two of them lay there in a deadlock—the horse unable to get up, Curly unable to withdraw his right leg. Just behind the kid lay the tied shoat, squealing his head off.

They lay there a long time—hours, it seemed to Curly. He wondered if his leg were broken. All he could feel was the weight of the horse and a growing numbness in that leg. He wondered how long it would be before Gawdamighty or Shinery Red got worried about him and came hunting.

Suddenly the black snorted and renewed his efforts to get up, scrambling with frantic urgency this time.

The kid turned loose the saddle-horn with one hand, reaching for a broken slab of rock behind him. He had an idea that maybe he could knock that fool horse in the head with a rock and kill him. Or maybe stun him till he could get his leg out.

The stone was just beyond his fingertips. He strained further, then looked around to see if maybe he was over-reaching the stone. Out of the tail of his eye, he caught a slinking movement. He halted his groping to look again.

Twenty feet away a stand of burroaks and mountain elms grew out of a split in the bedrock, shading a bench just above the kid. In the shadows of the trees crouched a catamount!

The horse kept snorting and slinging his head. The pig kept squealing. The big tawny cat crept forward a couple of steps and flattened again.

Curly had thought the situation desperate before. But now he realized it was doubly so. He knew from experience that Mexican lions are cowardly creatures and not in the habit of attacking man. At the same time, he knew this one was fixing to attack. That cat had him and the horse figured for cripples and an easy catch. Or maybe it was the squealing pig he was after. It didn't matter. Once that big devil raked up the guts to spring, he'd rip everything to pieces that moved under him.

For an instant, panic got the upper hand of Curly and he tried to scream. But if any sound came from his throat, he couldn't hear it above the constant and shrill squealing of the pig. Evidently, the shoat had got wind of the big cat and figured himself a goner.

The kid got a grip on himself. He knew he was in a tight here. This was a game for keeps.

Curly started to let the black to his feet and risk getting out from under, then had another idea. He reached for the slab of rock again. He failed to get it, but his fingers closed over a foot-long piece of Spanish oak branch.

He hurled that at the lion. The big cat dodged nervously to one side, then snarled and slapped at the club, sending it spinning away. Then he turned back to face his prey and his coughing roar was loud above the squealing of the shoat.

That's when Curly saw the black boar. The big killer hog with the broken tusk came crashing out of the brush to one side with a fearful explosion of sound. His bristles stood up along his backbone like the teeth of a wire comb. He ran with his head high and his mouth half open, exposing every fierce tooth in his head. He ran on tip-toe and his onrush carried him straight for the catamount.

The cowardly cat slunk sideways in fright, saw that he couldn't escape, then squalled and flung himself into the air to meet the assault.



THEY tangled not ten feet from where Curly lay with a leg pinned under the black horse. The cat landed on the hog, raking with bared claws, almost covering him. But an instant later the infuriated hog was out from under him and the catamount was rolling over and over, spitting and squalling and biting at a foot-long bloody gash along his ribs.

The big hog-heeled about and charged again, uttering roars of defiance. His blood-lust was up and he was out for a kill. The yowling cat raked long bloody furrows down the hog's shoulders this time, but the big boar hooked that broken tusk deep into the cat's neck.

The cat's squall was almost a scream this time and he reared high, with the blood gushing from his neck. On his hind feet, he doubled over and slapped with strutted claws at the hog's rump.

The blow only served to whirl the boar around faster for the next charge. And this time, he got in the lick he wanted. He went directly under the outflung claws of the furious catamount and drove

that broken tusk deep into the cat's soft belly. The cat screamed and wrapped himself around the hog, biting and clawing frantically. It was no use. The boar had the full weight of the cat on that sharp splinter of tusk. He lunged around, slinging the cat from his back and opening the savage creature's belly the full length.

The cat landed in the tall grass. He doubled up, crazed with pain, wallowing and snarling, biting and clawing himself, tearing out his own vitals. The boar halted, popping his teeth and watching the cat. Then he turned, facing Curly.

A Winchester crashed behind the paralyzed Curly. The catamount's head snapped up, then flopped back onto the grass. Curly twisted his head around.

Gawdamighty and Shinery Red had come up in time to see the finish of the fight. Gawdamighty was still in the saddle and fighting to hold Shinery Red's boogered bronc. Shinery was on the ground and sliding a fresh cartridge into the shell bed of his rifle. He brought the gun to his shoulder again. Curly saw his big brother pressing the trigger for a second shot and cried out:

"Don't shoot, Shinery!" he yelled frantically. "Don't you shoot that boar hog!"

The big bronc peeler hesitated, staring at his kid brother pinned under the horse.

"But he's fixing to tackle you and that horse, kid," he said. "If that pig ever squeals ag'in, he'll jump you, shore!"

"All right," snapped Curly. "Shoot the damned pig then. He's worm et till he's liable to die anyhow. If he ain't, he ain't worth one bristle on that boar hog. I'm a-warnin' you, Shinery. Don't you shoot that boar hog."

Shinery Red glanced up at old Gawdamighty, then back at the big black boar that stood there popping his frothy teeth. One wrong move here and that killer hog would go on another rampage.

"You heard Curly," said Gawdamighty. "Shoot the pig, Shinery, before the critter squeals."

Shinery Red raised his rifle again. "Keep a-holding that horse down, kid," he said.

The Winchester's report cracked like a whiplash in the canyons. The wounded

pig jerked, then slumped without uttering a sound. The big black boar quit popping his teeth and began to ease toward the brush, sniffing loudly and uneasily. Gawdamighty and Shinery Red rushed to where the kid lay under the fallen horse.

Gawdamighty caught the kid under the armpits. Shinery grasped the black's bridle reins. He pulled the animal's head as far back toward the saddle as he could and told the kid to turn loose the saddle-horn.

"Now be quick, Pa!"

"Let him up," said Gawdamighty.

The horse rolled to his knees with a snort and surged to his feet, stamping and kicking. But old Gawdamighty had already dragged the kid out of danger.

Nervous, face gray from fright, the old man laid his younger son on the ground again. "Is it broke, Curly?" he choked. "Is your leg broke, boy?"

Slowly, fearfully, Curly drew up his leg. A thousand prickling pinpoints of pain stabbed at his muscles.

"Aw, hell!" he grinned, getting up and stamping his foot to renew the circulation. "That fool horse has just laid on it till the damn thing's asleep."



THE three of them rode home, side by side. Gawdamighty, with the saddle-horn gouging his pumpkin belly. Big rawboned Shinery Red, with his long legs letting his spurred heels hang a foot below the shad-bellied bronc he straddled. Curly, sitting hunched in his saddle like a little old stringy bird.

The kid told them how the big broken-tusked wild boar had jumped the catamount in time to keep the cat from attacking him and the horse.

"That's howcome," he wound up, "I pawed sand when I seen you fixing to cut down on him with that Winchester, Shinery. That boar hog was just like Pa said old Coalie and Liverpill was—he had something he thought enough of to die for. That black devil heard the pig squealing. He come on the run. He got wind of that Mexican lion. He figured that lion had caught a pig. He didn't wait around

for no help. He tied right in. Come hell or high water, he aimed to save that pig. Seemed like I just couldn't let a critter like that git shot down in his tracks, 'thout no showin'."

That was the sort of sentimental reasoning that always got under Gawdamighty's hide. Tears came to his eyes and his chest swelled with pride. Shinery Red slapped a horsefly on his bronc's shoulder and grinned wryly.

"Off hand," he said to Gawdamighty, "I'd say the button's gathered a wrinkle in his horn."

"Plumb growed up," declared Gawdamighty. He reached back in a saddle pocket and drew out a bottle. "Have a drink, son!"

Curly's eyes stood out on stems. More than one time old Gawdamighty had prized up hell when he caught his younger son tampering with a whiskey jug.

"Go on," insisted Gawdamighty magnanimously. "Take a good un. Me'n Shinery poured a slug of that stuff down old Liverpill right after you pulled out from the house and damned if that old hound ain't up on his feet in less than an hour's time, bawling for grub!"

A surge of joy almost overwhelmed Curly. Liverpill was going to pull through and it looked like Gawdamighty and Shinery Red had finally realized he was a man among men. He straightened in the saddle and reached for the bottle.

He let a long drink rattle down his throat, like he'd seen Shinery Red do. He even managed not to cough and choke when he swallowed, but the fiery liquid did bring the tears to his eyes. He handed the bottle back and dragged his shirt sleeve across his mouth to wipe it. When he could finally get his breath he said:

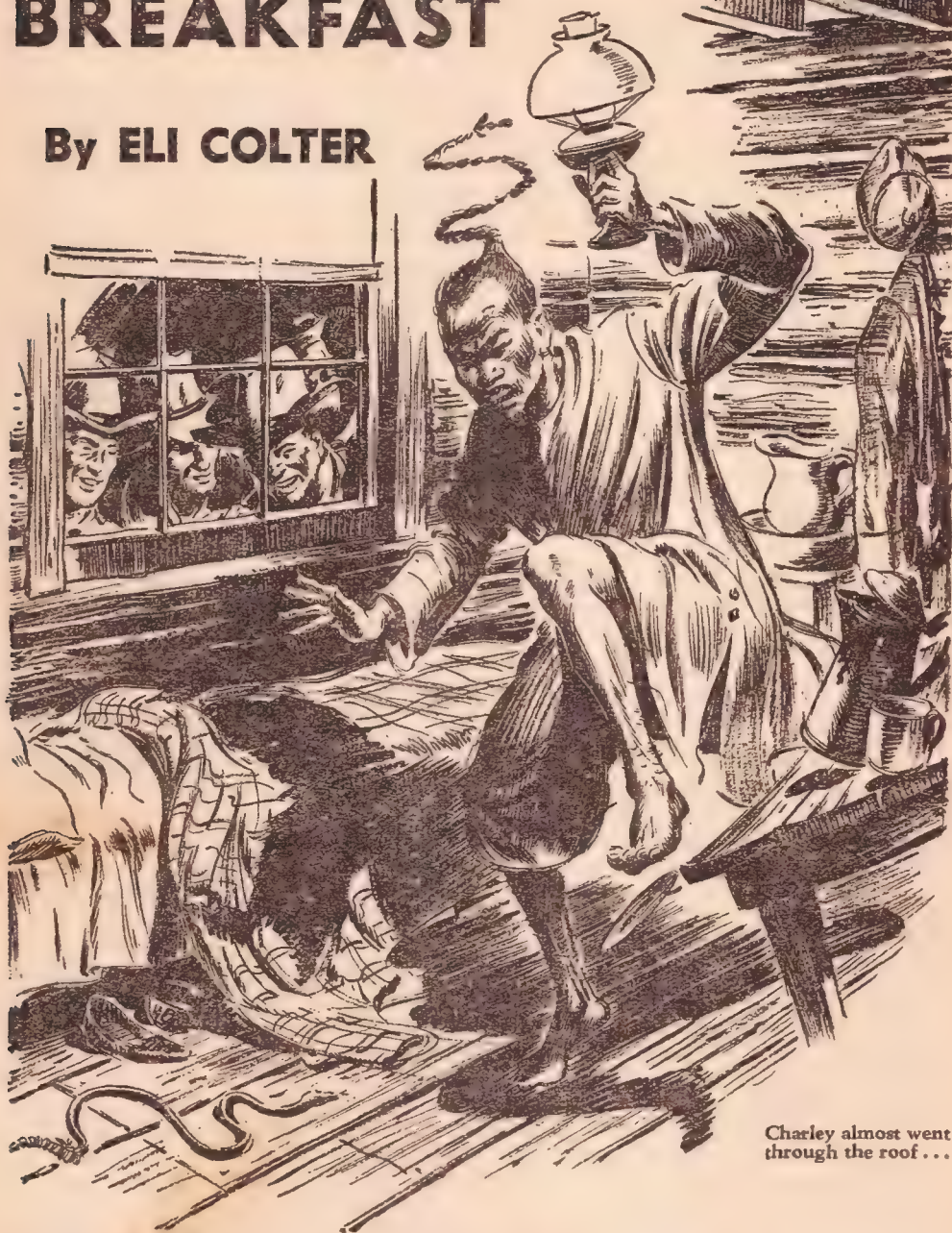
"By rights, I oughta go open that hole bigger in that corn-field fence. After the way that booger saved my fool hide, he ought to git a watermelon any time the notion strikes him."

Shinery Red winked at old Gawdamighty. "Now ain't he a ring-tailed tooter, Pa?"

Gawdamighty nodded proudly and lined up the whiskey bottle with his mouth and the setting sun.

BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST

By ELI COLTER



Charley almost went through the roof...

The cook-house table was always heaped high with food fit for the gods—until Cook Pigtail Charley sat at the bunkhouse poker table!

IT WASN'T easy for us to get a good cook, and whenever we did land one, we had trouble keeping him. Our ranch was in the lower left-hand corner of Idaho, south of the Owyhee Mountains

and northwest of Duck Valley Indian Reservation. Our nearest town was Bru-neau, about sixty miles by road northeast across Wickahoney Creek and the Bru-neau River.

Our boss, old John Gault, was in his late sixties, the missus was about the same age; they'd never had any children and were kind of set in their ways. But Gault paid well, and no man could ask for better treatment than we got on the Pigtailed G.

The brand had first been J G Joined, but it burned too much hide. The old man told one of the boys to take the iron to the blacksmith shop and strip it down to the G. The boy stripped the top of the J but forgot the tail, and the old man said let it go. The missus called it a pigtailed G and the name stuck.

The last two cooks we'd had were pretty bad, and finally the old man got desperate, this was in mid-summer, hitched the bays to the buggy and went cook-hunting. He went all the way to Mountain Home, in Elmore County north of the Snake River, before he dug up Charley Fong.

When he got back and drove into the yard—Charley got out. We boys were strung along the bunkhouse porch, looking on. Charley wasn't much bigger than a minute. His black silk pants and jacket fitted him so close they made him seem leaner even than he was. He came trotting toward us with the boss, taking in the line-up with a nice friendly smile, and the old man patted him on the shoulder and gave us boys the eye.

"Well, boys, here's your new cook, Charley Fong. He ain't never cooked on a ranch before, so try to get along with him." The boss went back to the buggy and heaved Charley's trunk out.

Buck Sawyer got up off his heels and walked over to the edge of the porch and said to Charley: "Pleased to meet up with you, Charley. I'm Buck Sawyer, foreman of the Pigtailed G."

Charley ducked his head and favored us with a wide grin. "Pleased to meet you. Pigtailed cook for the Pigtailed G, huh?" He turned his head so we could see his pigtail hanging from under his round little black hat, tied with a narrow black silk ribbon.

We all laughed, and thought he was pretty cute from the start. We ganged around, and got his trunk, and carried it over to the cook's cabin next the chuck-house, and told him to make himself at home.

We'd already hashed up a makeshift supper between us, so we didn't have a chance to taste his cooking till breakfast next morning. There wasn't much excuse for anybody not putting up good meals on the Pigtailed G, if supplies had anything to do with it. Twice a year the old man drove to town with wagon and trailer, and stocked the commissary with everything from canned peaches and tomatoes to flour and sugar.

The missus would have been lost without her milkhouse and churn, the milch cows were Guernsey-Jerseys, and there was always more milk, cream, butter, buttermilk and cottage cheese than we could use. The missus never raised less than around two hundred chicks a year, when the hens went crazy laying she packed eggs in twelve gallon crocks in water-glass, so the supply of eggs and fryers or roasters never ran out.

The old man smoked his own hogs, and the sausage and bacon and ham he put up was like nothing I've ever tasted since. It kept two hired men busy the year round milking cows, feeding pigs and chickens, butchering and curing. We had everything from corned beef to head cheese.



THAT first morning after Charley came, Buck Sawyer offered bets two to one that this would be the worst yet. No takers. We stood around in the bunkhouse, watching the smoke roll out of the stove pipe in the chuck-house, and when Charley banged on the triangle we answered the summons with our fingers crossed.

When we ambled into the chuck-house, no stench of burning grease hit us in the face. The windows were all open and no rancid smoke hung in the air. What we did smell was some kind of perfume that began with coffee and ended with bacon and you couldn't tell what came between. The table was scrubbed clean and set neat.

Charley said: "Good mawning, Mister Sawyah. Good mawning, boys. Bleakfass all leady. Coming light up."

Then the miracle began to happen. Two pancakes to every man; round and tender and brown-gold, smothered in maple syrup and butter, stripped with bacon that didn't have a dry spot or a quarter-inch of rubber in it. Coffee that tasted like Mocha and Java instead of quinine, and looked like chocolate instead of mud when you poured cream in it. We sat there and mooned over it and lapped it up and asked for another helping.

Charley said: "Very solly. No seconds. Moh glub coming up."

He rattled pots and pans on the big wood-burning range. The spuds were fried in butter, rich crisp brown outside and mealy flakes inside. The eggs were scrambled in cream. Two biscuits to a man, and if you'd breathed on them they'd have floated away. He topped it off with hot peach cobbler and clotted cream, and two cookies each that none of us had ever seen the like of before but tasted the way flowers smell.

When we got up and filed down-table with our dishes and eating irons and piled them in the big dishpan on the work table by the stove, Charley stood there watching us and beaming at us.

He said to Buck: "All light, Mister Sawyah? Bleakfass plitty good, huh? You-all get enough to eat?"

Buck sighed and put his arm around Charley's shoulder. "Charley, I love you like a brother. I'm so full I couldn't eat another mouthful."

Charley beamed wider. "Velly good. Velly good! Me love you, too. Dinnah moh bettah. Come twelve o'clock. Leady on time."

Buck said: "Yay, man. We'll be ready on time, too, fella."

But how we could be ready for what he served up is any man's guess. I never was much of a hand for soup. All morning while we were out pounding them on the tail, Charley was boiling a soup bone. The broth was thick with chopped carrots and onions, tomatoes and celery and shreds of beef. The inch-thick steak fell right out of heaven dripping with brown gravy.

The baked potatoes were busted open

in the middle like little banks of snow, their buttered skins shone like pale-brown satin, and there was a little lake of melted butter in the center of each one. Charley had got cabbage and lettuce from the kitchen garden, and made a kind of a slaw. He'd sliced some of the missus' lazy-housewife pickles and made mustard dressing for them. He finished us off with deep-dish apple pie that no other dried apple ever tasted like before, sided with a big slab of good ripe cheese.

After we had it all down, we got up and staggered out to the barn in a daze.

Mert Hall said to Buck: "You think he can keep this up? Or is he bluffing?"

Buck said: "Cowboy, that ain't bluffing. That's art."

Supper proved Buck right. The ham was baked in pineapple juice and brown sugar, with whole cloves stuck all over it and the canned pineapple baked on top of it. The potatoes weren't just mashed, they were whipped to creamy froth. You could have swam in the vanilla cream pie. And there weren't any left-overs. Charley cooked for eight men, himself included, he calculated his portions for each man, and he never wasted a cubic inch of food.

After we went over to the bunkhouse, we waited till he had got into his cabin and saw his light go on. Then Buck said to me:

"We don't want to let him get lonesome. Maybe he'd like to come over and sit and gab for a while. Come on, Dan, let's go ask him."

We went over to his cabin, and through the screen door we could see him sitting by his little table reading a Chink paper. Buck knocked, and Charley got up and trotted over to the door, and Buck said:

"We just thought maybe you'd like to sit and yarn for awhile. We ain't going to bed down for a while yet."

Charley was tickled pink. "Thank you velly much. I come light away."



HE BLEW out his lamp and we took him over to the bunkhouse. Mert Hall pulled up a chair for him. Buck asked if he'd like a drink. The old man kept plenty of beer and whiskey in the commissary, anybody who

abused the drinks didn't stay on the Pigtailed G. Our crew at that time had been there for years without changing a man. Buck got out a bottle of whisky and passed it around and we sat and talked for two hours.

Charley told us about himself. He'd been born in San Francisco and drifted north because he didn't care for cities. He had one brother in San Francisco and two in China. His mother and his father had gone to their ancestors. He was forty-three years old and he'd always wanted to live on a ranch. Finally he took one more drink and went back to his cabin.

He hadn't been gone five minutes when the old man walked in, leaned against the door, gave us a look-over and asked: "Well, how's the new cook?"

Buck said: "Where'd you ever find anything like that in Mountain Home? He ain't human."

The old man grinned. "Is he that good?"

Buck's voice was solemn. "If he ever gets the bellyache, I'll crawl clear to Duck Valley for the doc. If he ever dies, I'll buy him a gold-plated coffin."

The old man laughed. "Well, it's up to you to keep him happy. If you get bored, don't go horsing around with him. If you must have fun, go play tag with that big grizzly bear Ben Rice saw down the valley last week."

Buck snorted. "All the grizzly Ben Rice ever saw this far from the mountains you can put in my eye. Goodnight, boss."

Ben Rice worked on the ranch west of us near the Oregon line, and he had an imagination like a house afire. Next day at the table Jim Holyhead said something about the grizzly bear and Ben Rice, and nearly scared Charley out of his pants.

Buck tried to scowl a hole through Jim, and told Charley not to pay any attention to it. Buck said: "Ben Rice is always seeing things, Charley. What he took for a grizzly bear was probably an old cow poking her head out of the buck brush."

Charley looked dubious. "Me velly much afraid glizzly beah. The wildest animal me evah see was a hoss."

Buck laughed. "Well, that's the wildest animal you'll ever see on the Pigtailed G,

Charley. Forget it." Buck grinned widely.

There wasn't anything more said about Ben Rice's grizzly bear. The next night when Charley ambled over to the bunkhouse, we asked him if he'd like to play poker.

He played a good hand, too, took it kind of seriously and played them close to his belly. When the game ended, he was tickled as a kid because he'd won a couple of dollars.

By the time he was there a week, we knew two things about Charley Fong. We knew he was the best cook that ever wore sole leather, and we knew he loved money. He was happy when he won a few bucks, and disappointed when he lost. Not that he was a bad loser, he was a good sport all around. He just loved coin, and he collected it the way a woman collects jewels.

The way we found it out, one night he didn't come to the bunkhouse, and Buck and I went over to his cabin to see if he was all right. We peeked through the window before we knocked, and he was down on his knees by his old trunk digging something out. When he stood up we saw it was an old sock, heavy and sagging with coin inside. He took it over to his table and dumped its contents, and Buck and I stared.

There was a pile of gold pieces, double eagles and tens and fives. He'd scoured them till they glittered and shone, and from the size of them we could count them easy. He had seven hundred and twenty dollars in gold, and nine silver dollars he'd won off us.

He picked the gold pieces up reverently, and stood there polishing them on his silk sleeve. Just a kind of little miser-streak in him, I guess. He didn't want to spend it, he just wanted to hoard it and look at it. Buck and I went back and told the boys, and we all got a chuckle out of it and forgot it.

The next week Buck Sawyer and Jim Holyhead went south to turn back a band of strays. By the time they trailed the cows to Rattle Creek, Buck knew what they were in for, but he and Jim kept going. They chased the strays nearly to the Owyhee River before they caught up with them, shagged them back by moonlight and didn't get in till eleven.

We heard Buck bang on Charley's door, and we heard him say: "Hi, Charley! We ain't had a smell all day, and we're holler to our toes. How about a little grub?"

Then we heard him and Jim go on to put up their horses, and we saw light go on in Charley's cabin and in the chuck-house. Buck and Jim came in a little while later, puzzled and grumbling. I asked what was the matter.

Buck said: "Matter, hell! How'd you like to come in hungry as a wolf, and eat cold grub and damned little of that? The damn Chink don't have no left-overs. All we had was a slab of apple pie, cold boiled potatoes he was going to hash brown for breakfast, and a glass of cold milk."

I said: "Well, after all, it is getting on toward midnight. And you got to remember he never cooked on a ranch before. Just tell him, and it won't happen again."



BUCK took Charley aside the next day, and told him that lots of times we had to go without dinner and come in late, and he ought to get up a nice hot supper for us and not go serving us no cold snack like that. Charley didn't say much, and we thought that was the end of it.

But I was wrong: it did happen again. Any time we got in late, we took what there was, cold, and there was never half enough. Then all of us got together and talked to Charley and tried to explain. He came right back at us. He said he'd been hired to cook three square meals a day, and he did it. If we weren't there on time for meals, he wasn't hired to get up and cook in the middle of the night. Then we played a little poker, and Charley went back to his cabin.

Buck sat by the card table riffing the deck and scowling. "We got to make him see how it is, some way. Hell, I ain't paid to go sashaying all the way down to Owyhee River and bring back cows by moonlight, either. But the work you ain't paid for is more important than the job you are paid for, and we've got to make him see it."

But no amount of talking could get that through Charley's head. Things got continually worse, and Buck said we'd have to do something about it. I said do what, and Buck said we'd pull something on him to give him a little jolt.

Buck said: "Damn it, Dan, we've tried to make him see reason. If he don't knuckle down, we'll make his life miserable till he toes the line."

I said: "You know what the old man said about horsing around."

Buck grunted. "This ain't horsing around. It's self-defense."

So we started playing tricks on Charley. I forget now all the fool things we did to get that little Chink worried. For two or three days there was no kick-back. He was nobody's fool, he knew his pants legs couldn't tie themselves up and mud couldn't hop inside his shoes of itself, and he knew why we were hoorawing him.

The next morning, the bacon was rubber on both ends and raw in the middle. We thought up a better gag. The next day the potatoes were boiled with the skins on, and the only way they could have got that soggy was from being left in the hot water and sitting there all night. We thought up something a little meaner. The food kept getting worse.

But nobody was going to admit that Charley could get our goat. It was getting to be a private feud by now—and may the best man win. We ate the lousy food and told Charley it was swell. We sat around and played poker and Charley beamed and told us he never knew such nice boys in his life.

Then one night after Charley went to his cabin, Buck blew up. "Damn it, Dan, I'll show him. I'm going to put a snake in his bed."

I said: "Hey! You can't do that!" When you said snake in that country you meant rattler.

Buck leered at me. "Oh, can't I? I don't mean a real snake, you dumb bunny. We'll just get a harmless little garter or something, and tie some rattles to its tail. We'll scare the living hell out of him."

We spent two hours the next day running down a big red racer, killing a snake and cutting off its rattles. We took the racer home in a gunny sack. While

Charley was in the chuck-house getting supper, we tied the rattles to the racer's tail, and put the racer in Charley's bed, all covered up nice and neat so it would stay there.

The supper was lousier than usual, and we were all as polite as hell, and Charley won a dollar and forty cents and went to his cabin happy as a lark.

We blew out our lamps, and followed him, and peeked through the windows to see the fun. He put his dollar and forty cents in his trunk, and blew out his lamp and crawled into bed.

In about two minutes we heard him yell and leap out onto the floor. He was jabbering in Chinese as he struck a match and lighted the lamp, then stood there in his shirt tail holding up the lamp and looking around with his black eyes nearly popping out of his head. There was nothing to see. The snake was still in the bed. Charley sidled over to the bed and whipped the covers back.

The racer flopped out and went for the door like greased lightning. Of course, he couldn't shake his tail like a regular snake, but the rattles rasped and shimmied as he went across the floor. Charley rubbed his right buttock where the racer had snagged him, and looked so scared we almost felt sorry for him. Then the racer darted out the crack under the screen door.

His hide was so slick and hard the string couldn't hold against the tug on the door, and the rattles pulled loose. Charley stared at them, then he went over and picked them up, and looked at where they'd been cut off the snake and at the string dangling from them. Then he began to jabber in Chinese again.

We sneaked back to the bunkhouse and laughed till our sides ached. Buck said maybe we'd scared him into being a good dogie.

THE next day the French fries were burned to charcoal. The pancakes were scorched on both sides and doughy in the middle. They tasted like sour milk ready for the hog swill. They tasted like soda. They tasted like hell. You could have broken a molar on the flat white biscuits. The cold boiled eggs had little chickens in them, and the coffee had soap in it. I could even see the soap floating around.

We knew where he'd got the eggs. The missus always had a few old hens that wanted to sit, and she humored them no matter what time of year they got the maternal itch.

But nobody let a yip out of him. We chewed down the charred spuds and cast-iron biscuits. We munched the soggy pancakes and the boiled eggs with chickens in them and we swallowed the soapy coffee. We filed out and stacked our dishes in the pan and told Charley that was the best meal he'd cooked yet. He solemnly promised supper would be more better.

When we went into the corral to saddle up, Buck said: "This has gone far enough. This time, we're going to get him."

I said: "You better go slow. The boss can get seven good new cowboys easier than he can get one good new cook. Take it plenty slow."

Buck leered at me. "Yeh, and we can all die of indigestion. Look, Dan. You know how he loves that old sock of his. And you know he's scared silly at the mention of wild animals. Listen, and I'll give you the lowdown."

We listened, and Buck talked, and we had to admit it was good. That night we pulled it. Charley came over to play poker. We were all polite as hell. We asked whether he'd prefer stud or draw. He said he didn't care, so we made it draw.

For a Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year,
and a Swift Victory—
Buy War Bonds!

Charley started the game with ten berries in his pockets.

Now, any card player knows that if a game's honest, you can play all year and win a few dollars and lose a few, and come out about where you started in. You may strike a winning streak or a losing streak, but if you keep playing long enough the cards will change.

We were all good players, and this night we played them closer to our bellies than Charley did. We took his ten bucks away from him. He knew sooner or later the run would come his way, so he went over to his cabin and got twenty dollars more. We took that away from him. That kept on till we had over a hundred dollars of his money, and he was bug-eyed. He went over and got the whole sock.

Which was exactly what we were laying for. We waited till it was about even up on the table, then we began to let him win a little. He'd played with us long enough to know the game was always square. He took it for granted that this game was square too and that the cards had changed.

The game was square up till then. When we'd lured Charley into putting his whole pile up, Jim Holyhead suddenly looked out the window and yelled:

"Hey! Who said Ben Rice was loco about that grizzly? There he is right outside the window."

Charley jumped as if somebody had poked him with a hot iron, and jerked around to stare out the window. Jim switched decks so fast his hand looked blurred. When Charley looked back, Buck was calmly dealing the deck Jim had stacked two hours ago.

We acted like we were going hog wild. I crawled out on a limb with a bob-tailed flush. Jim broke his neck on an inside straight. Buck tapped himself and quit. There was nearly fifteen hundred dollars on the table, and Larry Gotch cleaned the pot with a full house.

Charley just sat there and looked at us. All his beautiful gold. No telling how many years it had taken him to collect that much. In the ordinary course of things, he probably never would get that sum together again. He looked sick.

Then Buck leaned over and began

counting out all Charley's nice bright shiny gold pieces. He added forty dollars in our dull coins. He shoved the whole lot across the table toward Charley.

Buck said: "Look, Charley. We don't want your money. This is just a game. There's what you brought in, and what you won. How about a little decent grub when we come in late and hungry."

Charley didn't say a word. He picked up his money and got to his feet and walked out. The next day we had grub for the gods again. The next time Buck and Jim came in late, they got hot coffee, hash-browned spuds, steak and gravy and lemon pie. It smelled so good we all ambled over just to sniff. Charley made us all sit down for coffee and pie with Jim and Buck.

That went on for two weeks, then we had another poker game that was a dinger. None of us boys had been to town since the two last quarterly pay days. The old man paid fifty a month, and in those days that was money. Buck cracked a couple of bottles. We all felt good, and Charley hit a winning streak. We didn't pay much attention at first, but he kept winning and we couldn't break it. By eleven o'clock there was nearly two thousand bucks stacked up.

And Charley cleaned it with a royal flush. Then he sat back in his chair and sighed and beamed. "We wukkk velly hod. You come ovah to chuck-house. I got chocolate cake, chelly pie, fly chicken, and spuds scalloped in cleam." He got up from the table, reached down, and shoved the coin into the center of the table. "I don't want youah money. This juss a game." He grinned a very big grin at Buck.

Buck scowled and said, "You're nuts, Charley."

Charley nodded. "Shuah. Me clazy like hell. Me smaht fella you. Me love all you felly velly much. Me want to stay on Pigtailed G. No moh bunned spuds. No moh soap in coffee. No moh cold glub nights. . . . No moh lattle snake." Then he took three aces out of his left sleeve, a king and a queen, two jacks and a ten out of his right sleeve, and as he laid them on the table face up, he said softly: "No moh glizzly beah."

WILDERNESS HERITAGE

By BARRY
GARDNER



"Plenty gravy—" Beaver
said . . .

*Killer Kurt Jance had the best alibi
in the whole Redpeak country—and
he rode it straight into the grave!*

AFTER robbing the Redpeak bank and shooting down the cashier in cold blood. Kurt Jance fled the town in a hail of bullets. He spurred furiously to the north, bitterly cursing the evil inside him that had made him kill the cashier and alarm the town, cursing the luck that had made one of those wild bullets wound his big roan horse.

Jance was a tall, blond man, with angular, hook-nosed features that were stamped with arrogance and cynical cruelty. He was wanted by the law over three states for numerous crimes. He was especially wanted by the Redpeak sheriff, Smoky Joe Starnes.

Several times Smoky Joe had almost caught up with him. The last time was about a year ago, when Jance had robbed the same bank and ridden this same way. But he'd got away safely, and he meant to do it the same way this time.

Forty miles north of Redpeak lay the little ranch belonging to Red John Kipp. Red John was going straight now, but he'd once ridden the owlhoot with Kurt Jance—and now Jance held the knowledge like a sword over Red John's head. On several occasions he'd used Red John's ranch as a hideout, or made Red John furnish him with a fresh mount. That was the way it was a year ago, the last time Jance had ridden this way and had made his getaway on the horse Red John Kipp had furnished him.

Red John had a son, a red-haired youngster of sixteen. Jance had got a kick out of ordering the button about, and enjoying the way the boy, young Beaver Kipp, had wilted and come to heel every time he, Jance, had threatened to expose Red John to the law. . . .

Atop a rise Jance paused and looked searchingly along his backtrail. No posse was in sight. The roan had been running fast, but with a jerky, uneven gait. The bullet, Jance found, had hit just behind the roan's left flank; he couldn't tell how badly the animal was hurt. Cursing sullenly, he remounted and dug in the spurs cruelly. It wouldn't take Sheriff Smoky Joe long to get a posse started on his trail.

Jance pushed the wounded roan without mercy, knowing that if he could reach Red John Kipp's place ahead of the sheriff he would be safe. On a fresh horse he could make it on across the Red Grizzly Hills and to safety.

The crippled roan ran its heart out willingly, and near sundown of the next day Kurt Jance came to Red John Kipp's ranch. The log ranch-house and sheds huddled among cottonwoods beside a creek. He could see he was in luck. In

a pole corral a hundred yards from the house he could see half a dozen rangy, tough-looking horses.

Blocky, red-haired Beaver Kipp was pouring water from a five-gallon pail into a trough in the corral. Jance saw no sign of Red John.

Jance had ridden up and stopped a few yards away before Beaver Kipp saw him. Instant recognition flashed in the youngster's blue eyes, and he turned and started running toward the cabin—to get a gun, Jance figured.

He yelled, "Hold up there, kid, or I'll cut you down!"

Beaver slowed, stopped. Jance rode up to him, gun in hand, and dismounted. The roan stood with drooping head. Beaver stood very still, his freckled face still and cold, hate in his eyes, as he looked at Kurt Jance.

Beaver said, "You've sure enough killed that hoss."

Jance shrugged, grinned. "It was me or him. Where's that paw of yours, Red John?"

"Not far off."

Then Jance demanded:

"When'll he be back?"

"Find out what you want to know for yourself," Beaver Kipp said angrily. "What do you want here, Jance?"

Jance laughed. "Why, I just stopped by for a friendly little visit. No use gettin' your dander up, kid. You'll crawl, just like you always have. Because if you don't, your daddy'll go to the pen. You know that, don't you?"

"I ought to know it. Me and Red John both have crawled on our bellies like sheep-killin' dogs ever since the day you found Red John here. . . . Reckon you've got a posse hot on your tail right now, eh, Jance?"

"That's right. I ain't seen 'em yet, but I know ol' Smoky Joe's back there. He may be along in a few minutes, it may be several hours—but he'll be along. Where'd you say Red John was?"

"I didn't say, and I won't. If a bronc is what you want, rope one out of that bunch there and ride."

"Now, don't hurry me, younker. I'm among friends, ain't I? I figure I got time to eat, and rest a few minutes. Lead out to the house."

BEAVER KIPP turned and went silently toward the two-room cabin. The button had filled out, Jance saw; he was solid and muscular, and he looked older than his sixteen years.

In the house, Jance ordered, "Get busy, kid, and cook me some grub. And do it quick." A gun-belt and an old range six-shooter—the only weapon in sight—dangled from a bedpost. Jance stuck the gun into his waist-band. He placed his own gun on the dining table before him.

He hadn't ever quite trusted Red John and the kid, despite the club he held over them. He asked:

"Folks on this range don't know Red John was ever dishonest, do they?"

"No, they don't." Beaver Kipp had kindled a fire in the cook stove, was placing strips of bacon in a frying pan. "He wasn't dishonest, either. He rode the owlhoot a little while, but he was forced to it. It ain't fair for you to make him—"

"And I don't want to listen to no sermon," Jance broke in derisively. "You'll do what I say, both of you, or Red John'll go to the pen. By gosh, I wish Red John was here. I'd like to make him cook that grub. I'd like to see him crawl and lick my boots. You reckon he'll be back pretty soon?"

The redhead youngster said nothing. He flipped the sizzling bacon with a fork, his back to Kurt Jance. Jance could feel the hate that was inside Red John's kid. The boy, Jance knew, had more real spunk than his daddy. Red John had a weak streak, he didn't have the backbone to tell Jance to go to hell, or to have it out with him man to man. The kid had taken Jance's cuffs and curses, but he'd never really crawled.

The thought kindled a wicked flame inside Jance. Before he left, he decided, he would teach the peppery brat a lesson.

He said, "Hurry with that grub, kid, before I take the hide off of you and whup you with it!"

"Bacon's done," Beaver said. He placed knife and fork and plate before

Jance. He lifted the hot frying pan from the stove and brought it to the table. Jance pushed aside his gun.

He said, "I like my bacon well done. And with plenty gravy."

"Plenty gravy," Beaver said—and with incredible swiftness he flung the frying pan with its scalding contents straight at Jance's face!

Jance dodged, squalling a surse, but a big part of the fiery grease splashed over the lower part of his face and cascaded down his shirt front. He tumbled over backward, his yell turning to an agonized moan, clawing frantically for the old six-shooter he'd placed in his waist-band.

But Beaver Kipp had followed the frying pan across the table in a lunging, catlike dive. He landed on Jance at the same instant Jance hit the floor, and his flinty fists hammered a savage tattoo on Jance's face. Red pinwheels whirled inside the blond killer's head. He tried to roll over, to throw off that cyclonic figure, but he couldn't do it.

Beaver Kipp beat him fiercely, without mercy, until Jance lay still there on the floor.

Minutes later, when he regained consciousness, he was securely trussed. Beaver Kipp had fried more bacon, and sat at the table calmly eating. Jance swore furiously for a while, threatening Beaver with every dire consequence he could think of—while Beaver looked at him serenely.

"You gone crazy, kid?" Jance demanded. "You can't get by with this. You wouldn't want to see Red John go to the pen, would you?"

"No, I sure wouldn't."

"Then you better untie me—and do it quick, too!"

Beaver Kipp was quiet a moment, chewing slowly, a faraway look in his young eyes. Then he shook his head.

"I won't untie you," he said. "You'll be right there when Sheriff Smoky Joe comes to take you back to a hangrope. You see, Jance, you can't hurt Red John any more. He died nearly four months ago!"

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SHAVETAIL'S

Gripping Novelette of a Fighting Man's Feud

By T. C. McCLARY

Tough-handed Sergeant O'Halloran was going to make that poppinjay shavetail crawl when he got him into the blizzard-blasted high Cristos, come hell, high water or Sioux scalping knives!

CHAPTER ONE

Private Feud

SERGEANT O'Halloran lounged up on the shooting step of the fort glowering at the chalk yellow heat that curdled across the magenta plains beyond the blue gleam of the Mora. He was thinking of this new young Lieutenant Abbott, with his pink cheeks and parade ground smartness, and the smell of the War College still upon him. For what he was thinking, he could have been court martialed.

He had meant to put this young shave-tail in place. But the lieutenant had beaten him to the draw by dressing him down with a cool detachment that boiled the Irishman's blood into a bile of pure hate. Abbott had found the mounts in excellent condition, but the men of his new command griping and sullen and sloppy with inactivity. That was a sergeant's lookout; O'Halloran still smarted under the sting of the officer's rebuke.

Because he was black and stubborn Irish, he had made it a personal feud and he would not bend an inch before the other's will. He meant to fight it out with silent insolence, and every trick in a veteran sergeant's kit. He was a fighting man, with a fighting man's raw and

primitive instincts; he meant to see this Lieutenant Abbott break or dead.

Sergeant McTavish' twanging burr interrupted his pleasantly black thoughts of mayhem. The Scot scoffed, "So after fourteen years a-sojering, ye don't even ken the ke-rect manner of mounting guard?"

O'Halloran flamed, "I been mounting guard nine years, ye long-nosed furriner, and I will do it as I always have!"

"No more ye won't, my laddie!" the Scot said with enormous enjoyment. "I have just been made warrant officer of the guard at this post."

"You?" O'Halloran demanded on an unbelieving note. "Why yer still a greenhorn! Ye've only been out of the file five years!"

"I have fought," McTavish reminded him good naturedly, "in three more engagements than you have."

"Yer a backsniping Army lawyer!" O'Halloran growled. "And I would like to know how many bellyaches ye've had when the trumpet sounded charge!"

He stared at him again with disbelief. "A greenhorn in charge of the guard! Sure, and we'll be scalped in our sleep the first month!" His temper was wild and black, and his square jaws slammed together like two bricks.

TRIGGER TONIC

The troopers, sabers flashing, were upon them . . .



McTavish reached out his plug and stood there taking a fresh chew with a pale twinkle in his slate grey eyes. He stood tall and lean as rawhide and built like a wedge. He had a dry ironic humor, no temper than anyone had ever seen, and he was coldly merciless as death. In-

variably, he read dead Indians into the grave with his arrow-gouged pocket Bible.

In contrast, the Irishman was squat and thick and fiery. His dark blue tunic was open to his belt, showing a powerful chest covered by a mat of flaming hair.

His legs were bandy, and the curve of the yellow cavalry stripes gave them the appearance of a hoop. He had fought McTavish, and because of McTavish, and with McTavish, and neither had ever been able to truly say which was the better man. Upon that basis of hard respect was built their friendship.

"Ye may be making a grave mistake in the mettle of this shavetail," McTavish noted. "He has a toughness behind that pink, baby face of his that I dunna quite ken."

"It is no real toughness!" the other snorted. "It is drill manuals and regulations and orders of the day! When it is himself he has to think of, he will be tipping his own scalp, I will lay on that!"

"Be sure it is not your scalp," the Scot grinned.

O'Halloran blasted out a breath of contempt. He jabbed a hand like a ham toward the treacherous and rugged country. "It will not take a skirmish to show the color of his liver. He will soon learn a man cannot drink the brightness of his buttons, or cross a desert afoot with general order four!"

"Ye may be right," McTavish conceded. "But I doot it. It would certainly be the first time if ye were."

An elaborate click of heels and spurs cut off O'Halloran's hot retort. He looked down into the black-burned face of Trooper Riekers. The trooper said, "Sergeant O'Halloran will report to Lieutenant Abbott in headquarters building immediately."

"Yer getting be-jingling fancy in yer talk," the sergeant growled. "Would it be bootlicking yer up to?"

"Never say it!" Riekers answered solemnly. He had himself been four times a sergeant, saved from discharge by his fighting record, but licked on post duty by strong drink. He gave them a look of innocent reformation. "The lieutenant has shown me the error of my ways. Hereafter, I am to be an exemplary model of military conduct for you sloppy hostiles and see if you can be shamed into some real *esprit de corps*!"

McTavish grinned and O'Halloran nearly choked. He turned the air purple until exhausted. At this point he dropped down the ladder and passed across the thick yellow dust of the parade.

In headquarters doorway, he saluted with a smartness that filled the room with dust. To his disgust, Lt. Abbott looked up across his desk and gave a bare nod of approval. He said, "That is more like it, O'Halloran! We will have cavalrymen in my platoon, or we will have corpses, but by thunder, we will not have infantrymen any longer!"

In any other officer, O'Halloran would have approved of these sentiments. However, he approved of nothing about Lieut. Abbott. The officer was tall and spare and broad with the look of a foxhunting man upon him. His features were sober and aquiline and just missed being delicate of line. There was a coolness to him that came of aristocratic breeding; this perhaps was what galled O'Halloran most.

The sergeant hated and distrusted the things Abbott came of, and the things he stood for. He had seen "gentry" in the Indian country before, and it had not been to their good. Thinking that, he was filled with insolent contempt. It was in the mocking challenge of his gaze.

The two looked levelly at each other, and neither was deceived. It was a hard country and a hard service and it took hard men. The one bridled at authority and the other meant to impose it. Each knew the fact, and enmity flowed between them in a solid stream.

The officer said after a space, "O'Halloran, you have been needing a sanding down and maybe this is it. Make ready a split platoon for scout."

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THE sergeant's eyes fired up with wicked glints. This was Abbott's first time out on scout. There were no drills and parades out in that wilderness. An officer's authority no longer came from above, but from the respect he could win or beat out of his men. Before this scout was over, they would hear the true ring of Abbott's mettle!

O'Halloran said, "Yes sor. Long or short scout?"

"Indeterminate. Make light pack, but winter flannels and greatcoats. You will take two extra corporals and McTavish as under-sergeant. Tom Wing for Scout."

"McTavish?" O'Halloran echoed. It

would be damned near a non-com's detail.

The lieutenant considered him for a long moment. "We are going out to trail and bring in Crooked Hatchet."

Surprise flattened the insolence out of the sergeant. Crooked Hatchet was as tricky and murderous a Sioux as they came. He was liable to be anywhere from the Shining Mountain clean to the broiling hell of Red Hole. A split platoon under an experienced officer would run the risk of both freezing and burning half to death before they tracked him down. And then getting ambushed and scalped for its trouble. Under a green officer like Abbott. . .

"There is one thing," Abbott said carefully. "An officer must have a first sergeant he can rely upon."

"Ah!" the sergeant breathed on a long note. The mocking challenge was hot and wicked in his eyes. "I have never failed to follow an officer yet, sor!"

A faint flush crept up Abbott's lean cheeks. "I expect more than that of you, O'Halloran."

O'Halloran had pierced that cool detachment of the other. Now he stood there savoring of his moment. He said, "Sor, it is a man's flag that he dies for if need be. But it is his officer he fights for."

The meaning was clear. The officer felt the lack of respect and confidence these veteran troopers had in him go through him like hot lead. There were but three recourses open to an officer who could not bend his men to his authority. Two of these were disgrace. He could request transfer, or resign, or die in action.

He nodded and watched O'Halloran salute and pivot out. He sat there considering the small seeds from which disension springs. This bitter enmity had started when he dressed the sergeant down about the dullness of his men's buttons. The buttons of his platoon now gleamed, and that should have ended the matter. But it did not. In that strange surly way of fighting men, they had interpreted the incident as meaning that Abbott was all buttons and no spleen.

O'Halloran found McTavish and gave the order. He then took occasion to growl, "It would save trouble to have us shot against the wall!"

"Ye could," McTavish suggested with good natured malice, "tell the captain about your saddle gall."

"*What?*" demanded the Irishman with flaming eyes. "And miss seeing this poppinjay get cramps in his stomach and crawl off into the rocks to die? It will be worth something to see that, me bhoy. It will be worth decorating some scalp pole out in the hills!"

Sunset splashed off Truchas Peak with savage glory. Then in one swift instant it was twilight and cool. The long shadows came across the land like a fast tide sweeping in purple dusk. O'Halloran turned out his detail for inspection. His face was a mask of contained insolence in the shadowy light of a smoky yellow lantern. After inspection of his own pack, he turned his mocking gaze straight upon the lieutenant.

He asked with scornful challenge, "Everything in order, sor?"

Abbott stood with his feet spread wide and his hands behind his back. He said, "O'Halloran, you have been at this a long time, haven't you?"

"Long enough," the sergeant answered easily, "to make a detail ready for scout, sor!"

"Then," Abbott commented coolly, "you should know that night departure calls for muffled chains and metal, sergeant!" He turned and walked over to join the major for his final orders, and left Sergeant O'Halloran boiling in black anger.

O'Halloran pivoted into McTavish' taunting grin. He gave a growl deep down in his chest, and then barked at his men through the thickening darkness, "Get rags and muffle up yer rattles. Ye spalpeened apes should be knowin enough fer that!"

He turned back and glared at McTavish. He growled, "Yer no exception, *sergeant McTavish!*"

The Scot quietly extracted rags from beneath his tunic. "I was thinking," he allowed loftily, "something like this might be in the wind!"

O'Halloran glared at him and his eyes were solid pools of fire against the dark. He turned and strode away for rags himself. McTavish' soft chuckle followed after.

A few minutes later the major came over for final inspection. He was a man profane, gruff and abrupt, but he knew men. He was now concerned chiefly with two things; the expressions upon Abbott's and his sergeant's faces. He gave an uncommunicative growl to himself and extended his hand. "Well, good hunting, lieutenant. If you don't bring in Crooked Hatchet, bring back some mountain venison at least." He stepped back to let the line swung into a column of two's.

The detail moved down into the valley. The muffled rhythm of their passage was gobbled by the song of the low wind. Campfires flickered against the night outside of Watrous, at the junction of the Cimarron Cutoff and Santa Fe.

Tom Wing's shadow took form close by. With the irreverence of civilian scopts, he addressed Abbott as "Cap'n." He said now. "Cap'n, Utes will be trailing that big wagon train, likely snaked up close. Mebbe we can cut behind 'em here."

Abbott nodded and gave the order to bend east. He heard O'Halloran grumble, "If I'd told him that, he'da rid straight through Watrous jist to show the emmigrants what a fine figure his platoon cuts on a clear night!"

CHAPTER TWO

Wolf Bait

FOUR miles beyond they hit the Cutoff trail, stretching like a thread of softly shining zinc across the plains ahead. According to orders they rode in silence for five hours, a column of shadows passing with only a dust muffled drum of hoofs through the uncertain darkness of the night. A mesa cut its solid form against the sky. Topping the rim, the moon suddenly rolled over the horizon, throwing the land into a sea of silvery shadowed light.

Abbott called a halt for bivouac. He sat his horse to address them after they hit dirt. O'Halloran cursed himself for

being outsmarted. Now he had to look up at the lieutenant, and he could see the cool, arrogant shine of his eyes against the darkness of his face.

The officer said, "A special order applies to all troopers and non-coms of this scout. No man will be permitted to help another until after we have gained our objective if his aid in any way endangers the usefulness of this command. This applies to so much as giving a drop of water. Is the order clear?"

There was a low sucking in of breaths, like the sound of a very distant wind. It was traditional with the cavalry that every officer and man of a detail would risk massacre before leaving one of their own behind.

"That is all," Abbott added, and turned his mount over to an orderly."

At the picket line, McTavish grunted in O'Halloran's ear, "Not tough, eh?"

"It is front," O'Halloran growled. "He will be the first to ask for help if he needs it. He will buckle like a paper bag at the first war whoop!"

Abbott sat beside his saddle and his blanket, feeling the hatred of these men smash against him like gusts of rising wind. In the darkness he could afford to contemplate his feelings. They were not pleasant for a young officer out on his first test. He had a moment of black and confused uncertainty of himself. Then a line of poetry occurred to him from somewhere. The line was, "If you can trust yourself when all others doubt you,"

It strengthened him and he had the passing ironic thought of what O'Halloran would think of a man who read poetry. He thought that it is sometimes more difficult to give orders than to take them; that formed the real test of an officer and a man. Well, he had given an order that caused every man there to hate him. By the end of this scout they would either respect him for it, or they would curse him right into that oblivion of the damned. He would return the leader of these men, or he would not return. The men themselves might see to that. With that grim

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thought, he rolled up in his blanket.

They cut Crooked Hatchet's trail at Wagon Mound, running from the still smoking ashes of a three-wagon party. They tracked him cross country, to a tributary of the Canadian, then high into the maze of the Mopa Hills. Here the trail swamped out, and then Tom Wing found it doubling back.

The scout said, "Cap'n, he knows we're trailing. He will probably wait in ambush."

"How many in his party?" Abbott asked.

The scout spit carefully and shrugged. "Only three. It means nothing. The Sioux split to travel. They will band together when he needs them." He nodded northward to where a bare wisp of smoke hung like gossamer against the sky. "Signals, cap'n. The country may be full of 'em."

"He is still running," Abbott noted.

"He is trying to get captives and booty back into the high Chistos," Wing said.

"But if we force him, he will fight. This is bad country, cap'n, and there were at least thirty braves at Wagon Mound."

The scout looked up at him with speculation in his sun-bleached eyes, then looked away. It was not his place to suggest orders. Nearby, O'Halloran jerked from the side of his mouth to McTavish, "Watch this!"

The lieutenant stood on the knoll and keened the country through narrowed lids. A high and sterile and treacherous looking country, spewed up by the devil and forgotten by God. A column could not ride five miles through there without riding through a dozen traps.

He said thoughtfully, "We have been on scout three weeks and there is not much fat left on our bones. I am new at this, Tom Wing. What would an old hand do?"

"Hah!" breathed O'Halloran in the background. "How the high and mighty come down! He is forgetting some of his cool pride and asking advice!"

"Something," McTavish noted, "which an Irishman would never have the sense to do!"

Tom Wing was hunkered down above the map he had been sketching in the dust. He glanced up now and studied this young

officer with the first glimmering of withheld respect. It was not often the young ones had this much common brain.

"Why, Cap'n," he drawled, "most old hands would think this a good time to turn back. That would be sense. But not every officer has sense, or the cavalry would not have put the fear of the Almighty into the damned Sioux now and then!"

"He will turn back," O'Halloran said confidently to McTavish. "It is an easy thing to ride full on into another brigade. It is something else to follow and get followed and never see a thing but smoke and tracks!"

The officer had not heard him, but he glanced across now and caught the devilish mockery in the sergeant's eyes. He called, "Here, O'Halloran!"

The sergeant came over and saluted. It was an unnecessary formality on scout and he performed it simply to show his insolent opinion of his superior. To McTavish's enormous amusement, Abbott returned the salute without a sign of it being out of place.

The lieutenant asked, "How many days short rations left?"

"About four, sor," O'Halloran answered. "Enough to get us back into game country."

"Good!" the officer nodded and caught the sudden flame of light in his sergeant's eyes. "Then it will get us four days ahead as well. Make ready to march."

"Ahead?" O'Halloran repeated thickly. He glanced at Tom Wing's enigmatic face. "Sor, has the scout told you this is dry country without a buzzard, and without forage?"

Abbott gave his cool smile. "Tom Wing has told me a jackrabbit was up here once . . . and died looking for his supper. Make ready, sergeant!"

O'Halloran gulped and saluted again, and this time it was without thought. He inspected the horses and men briefly and gave the order to mount. In the saddle, McTavish said, "Ye seem to be having difficulties betwixt your judgement and your dooty, sergeant!"

"Errra!" O'Halloran breathed. "Wait until he gets a taste of what's ahead!"

The lieutenant mounted and turned in the saddle. He said, "Every man is to

remember the general order to the letter. A trooper losing his canteen or horse will be on his own."

He looked every man in the eye one by one. Every eye that met his held a sullen glare. Except McTavish who shoved an unpierceable ironic amusement.



THEY rode all that day up into country that got higher more desolate by the hour. At sundown they found water and Tom Wing allowed, "Cap'n, I reckon for three days that's the last." They bivouacked and were in saddles at dawn. The night had been brutally cold, but within three hours the sun was beating down upon them like a furnace. They were in country now that looked like nothing but an endless rock pile, reaching tier upon tier up to a drab plateau. The beat of the sun was intense, but passing through deep shadowed defiles, the cold knifed into their bones.

They reined up for rest and rations at two. The rations consisted of one tooth-splitting biscuit and one drink of water for each man, two for his mount. They breasted the top of a hill and started down a long sloping shelf of wind scrubbed sandstone. Upon the right, the hill was littered with low boulders crowding them to the very edge of the shelf. There was a low drop here of roughly four foot height and then the bare, round hump of the hill continued downgrade.

There was a sudden curse in the middle of the column, the frightened blow of a horse, and then the sliding of hoofs upon the bad footing, followed by a heavy thump. A sidewinder had uncoiled from atop a boulder at McTavish's leg. In quirking the snake aside, McTavish had been off balance when his mount reared with alarm. He had been thrown over the shelf, landing on his back.

Riding next in file, Riekers had already taken care of the snake with his saber. Below them, McTavish was painfully getting to his feet. He said from below, "Just busted the wind out of me, sir!" But the sharp wince of his face told a different story as two men pulled him up. His back was badly sprained. He tried to limber it out and got back in the

saddle to ride well enough, but it was clear that he was badly hurt.

For the rest of that day, they dodged around through brush and drybeds and rocks working higher into the Cristos. By luck, they found a trickle of water at sundown. They got only four canteens out of the spring before dawn.

They could not risk a big fire, and would not have found enough brush if they could. The night was bitter, a biting bone-freezing cold that came down out of the clear sky in layers. The picket guard was changed each hour and spent the night beating the horses to keep them moving against the cold.

At dawn they looked down into a grey filled country and saw a line of smudge signals rising against the brash white of the sky. Tom Wing said, "We have been following the wrong tracks. That is Crooked Hatchet down there gathering a war party on the table. They will have us cut off in back for sure."

Abbott nodded without expression. "Then we will ride down and engage him if we can." He gave that cool, arrogant smile of his. "It will be easier riding down country, eh?"

He looked over his men and the effects of the night were on their blue-pinked faces. At least, no wind had come up. That was something to be thankful for. He found O'Halloran hunkered down beside McTavish. The Irishman looked up now and said, "The chill got his sprain. He can't move."

The man was blue-grey beneath his ruddy burn, with deep fresh lines of pain bitten into his face. His eyes were jaundiced as a crocus bloom. He was shivering spasmodically with cold chills.

As if at a signal, the men lifted their sullen glances upon the officer. No cavalryman had ever been left in a spot like that before. They were waiting to see what the officer would do now that he was actually faced with his own general order.

Abbot's face was a granite mask. He said, "Gather whatever chips and brush there is and move him to that shelter. McTavish, you will have to stay until we can come fetch you. Your mount stays. As a last resort, you will have to fall back upon it for food."

The intake of men's breaths had the ugly note of a blizzard wind. O'Halloran's eyes went red, his pistol shoulder hunched. McTavish gave him a nudge with his elbow. He said with something of his old humor, "Not tough, eh? Ye have not broken him or shown him up yet, laddie, and ye will take his orders like a trooper until ye have!"

O'Halloran gave him a crazy look. "But you can't last three days up here!"

"Ah!" McTavish breathed. "That is not so bad. That will still give me a day longer than you!"

They moved the sergeant and gathered brush and picketted his horse within reach. They had meant to each leave him some of their scant rations. Abbott stood like a statue of stone and watched to see that they did not. He spotted O'Halloran trying to strip off his tunic behind a rock and ordered sharply, "Sergeant, there will be no loaning of equipment! We have a night below us before engagement. That table will not be hot!"

O'Halloran stared at him with indecision, but he found no wavering of the officer's gaze. He said grimly at length, "I have been wrong about you, lieutenant. But only in one way. I hope when the time comes you will be as hard upon yerself!"

"And if that should prove out?"

The sergeant gave a snort of utter impossibility. "Then any trooper here would follow you to hell itself!"

For an instant, Abbott saw the lift of swelling muscles along the man's neck, and the tight, grim pull of his lips. Then the sergeant took a breath that sucked in with the noise of running sand, and set his teeth. He saluted.

The lieutenant gave the order to march and personally remained to see that no man took occasion to toss his rations to McTavish. McTavish watched the departure with mixed feelings; with those thoughts of a man left stranded under such circumstances, with his dry humor at how they had underrated Abbott, and with a rather cynical respect for a man who could be as hard as that. He had the idle speculation as to whether it would be a Sioux war knife in the front, or a carbine bullet in the back which got Abbott first. Then he watched Abbott move out

of sight, the last of the file of troopers.

The file rode in a sullen, pulsing silence until commanded to a halt not far below the shelf. Abbott called, "O'Halloran, take command until I catch up. I want to locate those smoke signals on my map."

CHAPTER THREE

"A Man Dies For His Flag"

HE TURNED and rode back to the rocky prominence, leaving the command to file on ahead. Within an hour, he had overtaken the command. They came down onto the table and found it an immense plateau three thousand feet above all that country, except on their one side. It was scarred and eroded and gouged with nothing but sparse low brush upon its face. The footing was hard and uneven at best. There were great fields of sharp gravel, and strewn stones to cross, with unexpected fissures and canyons that took the heart out of man and horse.

It had been warm as a clear winter day all morning. But at high sun, the skies clouded to an ugly, mottled grey. Tom Wing rode in and said, "Wind a-comin', Cap'n. This is going to be the coldest hell we'll ever roast in!"

Abbott signalled a halt. "What do do think about Crooked Hatchet?"

"He is up here on this table," Wing said. "I'd be thinking he aimed to get us tomorrow . . . *in the back*. That's reckonin we don't freeze up fust."

He took a fresh chaw of tobacco, and spit, and for the first time in his life unasked, offered an opinion. He allowed, "Cap'n, this table is cut up like the China Sea with ambush places every twenty inches. We're about out of rations, and damned near out of water, and winds this high have just plumb killed man and beast before."

He clamped his lips together like two pancakes and looked rather surprised at himself for having said so much.

"What else is there?" Abbott asked.

Tom Wing jerked his thumb. "That east rim. Side's wooded. Travellin fast, we could get down into country with water, fire a game by tomorro, least."

"And Crooked Hatchet?"

"He'll hole up and wait out the wind and then push straight acrost for the high Cristos."

"Then," Abbott said, "we'll stay up here and get him."

He turned in his saddle and looked at the men and found every man looking away from him with murderous anger except O'Halloran. The sergeant's eyes were slits of hatred. On his face was a savage patience to watch Abbott crawl. O'Halloran would, he thought, stand by and watch an Indian scalp him with real pleasure.

He signalled "*march*" and the great-coated command went into motion in a column of two's. Behind them, an eerie hum began to sound. They got the wind first, and then the dust, and then the cold. All day long the three of these elements beat against them, and into them, and formed a world of freezing, choking, whistling grey. Abbott had experienced colder temperatures, but never a wind like that on an unbroken tableland above all the world; he had never known that the bones of a man's body could get so cold.

There was no sunset; the sun did not show again that day. There was simply a darkening of the ugly grey light into utter blackness. The dust had caused the use of over triple water rations that day. They finished the last of their water, and it was not enough, and the animals were suffering as badly as the men. They had only the smallest fire, barely enough to heat the last of their coffee.

Men slept clinging to one another Indian fashion. Nobody got the chance to sleep themselves into that warm world of the frozen man. It took a double picket guard to keep the horses moving. It took double sentry against attack. At midnight, the wind ended as suddenly as if cut by a knife. But now the cold increased, a great, blanketing cold that gobbled at a man like a sea.

O'Halloran was on duty as dawn cut a dirty smudge across the mottled sky. He stood there beating his arms around his body, and with a savage smile, saw that it took Abbott five tries to trise. Of all those who had suffered from the day and night, the lieutenant had suffered most of all.

His face was pinched and etched with pain and bloodless, his red-rimmed eyes racked with some inward fever. His voice was thick and cracked and had lost its coolness. He lost that "officer" look which even O'Halloran had to grant, he had maintained until then.

"Wurra!" O'Halloran growled with gusto to Riekers. "He is cracking up now for sure! He will get a taste of his own arrogance and orders, and what it means to suffer, before the end of this day!"

"A fat lot of good it will do you where you're going!" Riekers growled back. "Do you see that?"

Two signal fires were telegraphing against the cold gray dawn. They were veteran Indian fighters, those grim men, and they read the signals and knew what they meant. Crooked Hatchet was somewhere ahead of them to north. Another band of his party had the east rim guarded.

Tom Wing explained these signals to the officer. Watching him, O'Halloran saw the sudden stony setness come into his face. He heard Abbott say, "No retreat!" and in that he saw all the fulfillment of what he had thought all along. Abbott had been meaning to retreat, had simply put them all through this hell and killed McTavish to boot for a big show!

"Why—I!" he growled at Tom Wing while they were limbering up the horses for the march.

Wing listened without making answer. It had been his hard experience in life that the less a man says the better, and longer, he will get along. He was not sure but what O'Halloran was right. But it was a mighty painful way for an officer to make a show for his report!

They got into marching order and moved out. No water, no breakfast. Within the hour they cut sign of Crooked Hatchet with a band of fifteen warriors or so. Wing said, "He has no booty horses with him. He is ready to make fight. He has circled and is trailing us, probably behind that low line of hills."

Abbott sat there and began to shiver. The sickness within him burst onto the surface like a gusher. He looked at the men, and started to say something, and then meeting the flat hatred of their faces, closed his mouth.

The column marched ahead through biting cold under a leaden sky. The officer grew sicker and weaker looking by the minute. He rode with his mouth open, his tongue thick and lolling between his lips. He had to hang to his saddle as he rode.



NEAR mid-afternoon the clouds opened to let through one great broad beam of slanting golden light. It gave the dreary, desolate land perspective. They were riding in a trough between two rows of broken, low bare hills. Riding with flankers to the right crest, Tom Wing reported back that a gulch behind cut clean down to the foot of the table. His keen eyes searching the opposite hills, he suddenly found what he was looking for, a bare dot of movement between two hills.

He said, "They will come soon, cap'n." Then, his gaze traveling on beyond, "So will a blizzard."

The lieutenant tried to focus on the landscape, and wavered in his saddle. Suddenly he lurched so that Tom Wing had to catch an arm and bolster him. He signalled up O'Halloran. In the sergeant's eyes was a unmitigated satisfaction that the young lieutenant couldn't take it.

The barest shade of grim humor passed across the officer's lips. He asked, "You recall the general order, sergeant?"

"Aia!" O'Halloran breathed. "I have not let it out of my head this past twenty-four hours, sor!"

"You will see that it is obeyed to the letter," the lieutenant said. "Behind that line of hills is a gulch. Over there is Crooked Hatchet. There is a blizzard coming, and Tom Wing says he will probably attack behind the face of the blizzard. If I place you in command, O'Halloran, where will he expect to find you?"

"Jist," O'Halloran growled, "where I will be, sor! Trying to make the best of it down that gulch!"

Abbott gave a weak, fatalistic nod. His tongue was so thick he could barely speak. He said, "Take over. I cannot order you what to do then except to use your judgment. Were I still in command, I would

make a play of getting to the gulch, but take position on this side the hill among those rocks just as the blizzard struck. And I would mow those damned Sioux down to the last man, saving Crooked Hatchet."

O'Halloran stared at him. For all of his black hatred, he felt a stirring respect. The lieutenant had gotten himself into this fix, but he was going out like a man. In addition, his strategy was good. O'Halloran had to remind himself of McTavish to harden up again.

He said, "Very well, sor. What will you do?"

"I will follow," Abbott said, "as long as able." They looked at each other with grim understanding. It would not be long. Abbott's horse had petered out and could not keep up. The Sioux would notice this split and account for the officer fast.

O'Halloran said grudgingly, "I have been wrong in a way, sor. Things being different, I might have served well under you at that." It was a statement of fact without any softening of feeling. He saluted, and his eyes were still aglow with malicious satisfaction. Then he wheeled his horse and signalled Tom Wing and took command.

There was no galloping for horses in this spent condition. The column was half way up to the right line of hills when Tom Wing said speculatively, "Damned funny the way he washed out so sudden after three tough weeks."

O'Halloran snorted. "It was front he was living on, me bhoys. Brass front. When it cracked, he went to pieces is all. I will give it to him that facing eternity, he is taking it like a man." He gave a grim smile of ruthless devilry. "McTavish will be waiting there to welcome him in!"

Wing was studying the black wall that marched across the plateau like a sheet of solid night. Now his fine ears picked up a faint drumming sound behind them. Just as the clouds were shutting out the sun he said, "Trooper coming. McTavish?"

O'Halloran turned and stared and called a halt. It was a trooper right enough, and he was bent into a hard gallop, which was more than their own horses

could do. He gave a curse of mixed puzzlement and fierce gladness. He ordered carbines out to cover the man's approach, and then looked at Tom Wing. He demanded, "Where'd he get the food and clothes to keep out the cold, and the water for his animal to drink?"

Wing looked back into the trough where Abbott was lurching along his lonely trail of death. He spit carefully, and then gave his opinion as definitely as he was able. "It could be," he murmured. "I hadn't thought of it. But he went back alone. He was the only one not covered by the general order. And come to think of it, that greatcoat looked kind of loose upon him." He cocked one eye at O'Halloran. "Did you see the cap'n take a drink of water yesterday?"

O'Halloran stared and suddenly ejaculated, "Bejabers, no!" On his face was that startlement of a man realizing the error of his whole conception of another man.

He turned in the saddle, and there was roaring fight in his tone. He said, "Boys, we will gallop now or we will beat these animals down in the dust! Orders or no, we are going back for the lieutenant!"

He wheeled the column, and the horses were able to make a pretense of galloping down grade. They got to the lieutenant just as he was falling. Sliding his hand under his greatcoat, O'Halloran found he wore no tunic. Also, there was no canteen upon his saddle.

They started back for the hills, keeping an eye out to cover McTavish if need be with their rifle. McTavish caught up, and there was no longer irony on his face as he looked at the young officer. There was a lump in his throat and a sting in his eyes, and to cover it, he let out a blast that even surprised O'Halloran.

There was spirit in them now. That spirit was picked up by the horses. They pushed at a fast walk toward the crest of the right hills. The other hills disappeared behind that wall of black. Then the trough. And then out of utter silence, that howling black wall was full upon them.

O'Halloran roared out, "Into them boulders and shoot every shadow yer see!"

They had just gotten in when the thick black face of the blizzard lessened out to gray. Out of the gray came fast riding, devilishly howling shadows, not looking for trouble from the boulder next, but set at falling upon the column in the gulch beyond. O'Halloran let out a fierce roar of "Fire!" and the swirling world of gray was cut by the orange-black stab of carbines.

Hot lead roared into the blizzard!

Sioux went down and their horses went down, and then the troopers were on them with their sabers. In ten minutes the head of the blizzard had passed, and they could count the score. Twelve Sioux lay in their own blood. One with no blood about him lay out stiffly under the half-conscious body of Lieutenant Abbott. Riekers had been killed after getting two Sioux braves, and there were three troopers wounded.

McTavish was grimly silent.

Making his report, O'Halloran said, "That is twelve dead, then, sor, and Crooked Hatchet you captured."

Abbott looked at him weakly. There had been snow enough to give them water, but a man did not get over a freezing that fast. He said:

"O'Halloran, I wasn't in the engagement."

O'Halloran gave him his most innocent Fenian look. He said, "I can only say what I found, sor. Crooked Hatchet had been knocked out with a pistol butt, and you were sprawled across his body." He turned for confirmation and called out, "That true, McTavish?"

Abbott was silent.

McTavish paused in reading his Bible over a departed Sioux. "Gospel!" he nodded. "Ye've had your baptism, lieutenant, and passed the test!"

"You did a good job, O'Halloran," the officer smiled.

The sergeant grinned. "A man dies for his flag, sor. Well, we didn't die, we fought. And men fight for their officer, like I said."

The two grinned hard at each other. A tough young officer, and a tough old sergeant, and both knew each other for what they were. There was no better basis for respect than that.

THE END

RESPITE FROM THE GALLOWS



Dave's second shot drove the giant back . . .

By
JAMES C. LYNCH



For a brief holiday in town—a respite from the hangrope—owlhooter Dave McAlister gave a solemn promise no man could keep.



SWATHED in a tattered saddle blanket, young Dave McAlister huddled against the lee side of a jutting rock scarp. Yonder, in the wild dark, the wind built great sand dunes across the flats of Hell's Pasture. Towering rock needles were being buried. The tracks of a lone fugitive would have long since been wiped out. Once Dave shouted out:

"Blow, damn you! Blow! Bury the

whole rotten cowland and all the law and all the sheriffs in it."

The outburst brought sleep—then aching silence came to waken him again. The wind had died. The sun was up, a brassy ball ramming its heat through towering miles of ochre dust. Scrubbing his burning eyes, Dave sat up. He could scarcely see a dozen yards; hot, hanging dust had narrowed his world to that short span.

Worry came and he forced it back. He was still alive, free of that ferret sheriff from Desert Pass who had tried to head him off. Why couldn't they let a man be, those killer sand crooks who hid behind a badge? Honest Ben Logan they called that Desert Pass sheriff. Honest hell. When a man hung on a star he buried honesty and straight talk in a deep grave.

Dave dug out his canteen. There was little water left. Three spare swallows he allowed himself; had to save some for his sorrel horse. He rose, found his picket rope and stumbled after it around the shoulder of the scarp. The horse was gone.

Afoot, few men had braced the heat of Hell's Pasture and lived. Those few had made it straight for some known water hole, guided by distant blue peaks. A slinking coyote could not make straight for any water hole, a coyote who couldn't even see the blue peaks rimming this hell. Blue peaks, cool and shady, where men waited to shoot him down.

Dave squinted at the sun, made a half turn right and started out. If he kept the sun at his back until noon, then in his face until dusk, he wouldn't vary much from a straight line. Might be a slim chance to live; to live and run some more.

His booted feet sank deep into the loose sand. His mouth grew dry. The hanging dust tormented him. Slowly he slogged on toward the hazy wall before him, a wall that let him see so much and never more. He was staggering when he saw the horse and, two steps further on, the man.

Dave stopped. The man, on hands and knees, crawled painfully toward the animal. With every move he made, the beast edged nervously away. It took Dave a long time to realize the animal was his, the man—Honest Ben Logan. Logan without a weapon save the gold star on his vest.

Dave lunged, caught the dangling end of the broken picket rope and backed away, baring his teeth at the lawman. Logan stopped, batting his red-rimmed eyes. Thirst made his words sound thick.

"You, eh, McAlister. Sure beats hell how the bad of this world keep coming out on top. You going to notch that gun for me, like you did for Sheriff Roane?"

Dave squatted down, hugging his canteen. "Roane was a wolf," he said. "He deserved what he got. If he ever comes back to life, I'll kill him again. I owe that much to the decent folks living in this world."

"A killer's old story," gruffed Logan. "You want me to turn my back?"

Bitterness deepened the hollows in Dave's cheeks. All through the long, torment-filled night he had wished death on Ben Logan in every form he could conceive. Now—a strange hunger warped his thoughts. He could not shake the feeling off any more than a starving man forget the want of food. He held his canteen high, staring at Logan.

"You want a drink, Sheriff?"

Logan shook his head an spat: "No."

"You'll die if you don't drink," Dave pointed out. "You'll go mad. You'll claw in the sand and your tongue will fill up your mouth. It's awful. I learned how it was by being chased by great men with stars on their chests. You can have some water if you want, if you make me a promise."

"Go to hell."

Both settled back, each watching the other. Minutes passed. An hour. The sun soared higher into the gritty sky-vault. The sorrel drooped. A rattler slid into view, whirled its deadly challenge and writhed away.

Slowly, Dave shook the canteen, making the sound of sloshing water carry across the interval. But there seemed to be no flaw in the older man's iron. Dave was ready to pass the canteen over anyway when the lawman seemed to cave.

"What do you want, McAlister?"

Dave kept himself calm with an effort. "Two days in town. Two days with two square meals each day, with my feet under a white man's table. Two nights to walk the streets without being afraid of my shadow. Two nights to look at women, to

watch kids playing and hear an honest laugh. Promise me that, and four hours start, and I'll get you out of this hell-hole, Sheriff."

Logan shook his head. "I've never dealt with crooks and killers."

"No one is asking you to," flared Dave. "This deal is between you and me."

Logan stared at the canteen, his swollen tongue sliding around his cracked lips. "Damn your soul, McAlister," he croaked. "You're worse than a murderer. You're a white Injun. Two days in my town—bah! I wouldn't trust you two feet."

"Look who's talking," jeered Dave. "I've got to trust you, don't I? You, a lousy sheriff—like Wolf Roane."

"Damn you!" railed Logan. "Why'd you have to stumble onto me?"

Thirst and heat were cracking the man's iron endurance and Dave had to fight back pity. "Two days," he intoned, sloshing the canteen. "Two short days and nights, then you can have another crack at me. Think it over, old man. Isn't there someone waiting you'd like to see again, someone shading her eyes for a first glimpse of you riding up the road?"

Logan's head tipped back and his lips moved soundlessly, as if he asked some greater being than himself for strength to reason this decision. At last his shoulders slumped.

"I'll go you. Two days in Desert Pass. Eat at my house. Walk the town's streets. Four hours after you quit town I'll take your trail. I won't stop at county lines or territorial boundaries. I'll catch up with you somehow. I promise you that and I've never broken my word to a living man yet."



HOURS after darkness had come Ben Logan pulled the sorrel up before a tight barn. Dave slid down and put an arm about the older man to help him light. The lawman grunted when his boots hit dirt, his knees buckled and he clung to the stirrup until new strength came.

A light winked on inside the house, a door swung and a woman stood there limned against the yellow glow. She was too far away for Dave to see, yet when

her voice came, he drew his picture of her, sharp and clear and beautiful.

"Dad!" she called. "I was afraid—"

"You worry too much about me, Molly," gruffed Logan. "Put on the coffee pot."

She turned away, the door closed and Dave felt indecision come to try the older man. Finally Logan fumbled for the latigo strap.

"Let's take care of this pony, killer," he growled. "You're going to need it plumb bad in two days."

When the chore was done, Logan clamped his jaw and mumbled a curt: "Come on!"

Dave took a step and lost his nerve.

"I can't," he heard himself mumble. "Not tonight. I'll sleep in the barn."

Logan hesitated, then laughed, grimly. "Have it your way, but don't try anything. You'll live longer saving yourself for me." He shambled tiredly toward the house.

Dave snuffed the smoky lantern and sank down on a pile of hay. And next he knew, the sun was shining in his face. He came up, reaching for his gun before memory penetrated the sleep fog in his brain. Cursing, he put it away again and moved stealthily to the front door of the barn to peer out at the house he had seen the night before. It was white and well kept, a riot of flowers surrounded it and closer was a neat patch of garden rich with growing things.

He turned away and led his pony out back to the brimming trough. Peeling off his own shirt, he beat it free of dust and buried his head in the cool water, whooshing and snorting. He was combing the glistening water beads from his black hair when the girl stepped from the barn.

His dream of last night fell far short of what he saw now. She was lithe and strong and warm with all of a woman's promise. Something tightened up inside him and loosened again. After that he smiled.

A flush of shyness came to heighten the color in her cheeks, then faded. "I'm Molly Logan," she said. "There is a good breakfast waiting for a hungry man."

"I'm that man," Dave smiled and reached for his shirt. She turned away and was waiting by the set table when he stepped into the kitchen.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

There were things to eat Dave had dreamed about while munching tough jerky at a lonely, fireless camp. Good things to eat, a lovely girl to look at—a girl who smiled at him in a friendly, warm way. He lifted his fork and put it down again, suddenly troubled.

"Your father tell you about me?" he asked.

"He told me you saved his life," she said soberly. "I've been trying to think up words to thank you for that."

Dave scowled. "That all he told you?"

She leaned forward. "Is there more?"

"There's more and he should have told you," he said woodenly. "Anyway, you owe me no thanks." He fell to eating, holding his tongue until he was through. "Thank you," he said then and hurried out and toward town, his jaw tight.

The town was like a lot of others he had seen perched on the desert's rim. A red brick courthouse made the main street split and form a square. Ben Logan's office was in this building and Dave found the lawman there, laboriously filling out a form.

"Howdy," grunted the older man. "You get fed?"

"I ate at your house," Dave told him. "But not no more. All that girl of yours stands for don't belong at the same table with me. Why didn't you tell her?"

Ben Logan grunted. "Don't be a fool. I told her all about you. Just like I told the twenty good men guarding every way out of this town. Men I'm paying out of my own pocket to see you go out the way I say, or not at all. Men who'll step on every ant that tries to crawl out until I give the word it's all right for 'em to go. Now get out and let me work."

Dave did, his thoughts turned entirely to Molly Logan. A man could die for a woman like that. Well—he lowered his head and started up the street.

◆ ◆ ◆

"WILL you look what the wind blowed in!" Dave stopped, the tone of those words drenching him like ice water. Cold eyes, framed by wild black hair and bushy beard, laughed at him over the saloon

RESPIRE FROM THE GALLOWS

porch railing. The beard was new to Dave. But the enormous head and body of the man, the arrogant voice and eyes could only belong to Bat Christian.

"Don't stand there gawkin' like a jay-bird," ordered the big man. "Come up here and take a chair. You ain't forgot old friends, have you, just because you're rubbin' shoulders with a lousy sheriff?"

Dave moved up the steps, resenting Bat pegging Ben Logan for a lousy sheriff and wondering why he resented it. Logan was his implacable enemy, Christian the only kind of a friend a hunted man could ever have. He settled into a chair beside the big man.

"Taking a steep chance, ain't you?" Dave asked the big outlaw.

"Maybe," murmured the giant. "What's your deal with the law?"

Dave told him and, when he was through, Bat Christian shook with silent laughter. "That's great, Kid. Great."

Dave said: "I'm listening."

Christian whispered fiercely. "You remember the time you came to me, Kid?"

"I remember," Dave acknowledged. "Because I had killed a wolf that walked on two legs I'd been chased, filled full of lead and was dying. You saved my life, fed me and gave me a horse to ride. And when I rode away, I promised I'd do all I could if you ever needed a hand. What can I do?"

Bat's big paw found Dave's knee with a hard slap. "I knew you'd come through, Kid. And I was goin' plumb crazy till you come along. All day yesterday I sat here listenin' to the hammers poundin'. Hammers buildin' a gallows for the hanging of Webfoot and Spider Toles. Ben Logan, the lousy son, he's stringin' up those boys tomorrow."

Dave felt cold. "What can I do about that?"

Christian barked: "You can do everything what needs to be done! Logan would try for me, even if I had the drop on him cold. The only time I dare stick my nose out is when he's in his office. When he comes out, I duck into the back room. Friend of mine owns this dump. You got to help get them boys out of jail."

Dave shook his head. "It won't do any good. You couldn't get anywhere. Logan's



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got twenty men watching every soul who leaves this town. You'd never make it alive until after I'm gone. Webfoot and Spider will be dead by then."

"We'll get out," enthused Bat, confidently. "I've got it planned way ahead. Say—you ain't slidin' out on us?"

Dave thought it out. And it was like a man throwing loaded dice. Always the answer was the same. If he kept his word to Ben Logan, he could not expect favors for that. Ben Logan wouldn't even know about it. He would only know when Dave McAlister broke his promise. And if he, Dave McAlister broke his long given word to Bat Christian, then even the lowest outlaw of them all would shun him.

"I'm not sliding out," he murmured. "What's the plan."

"Come six o'clock," said Bat softly, "a night man comes to relieve Logan. They always meet in Logan's office. But tonight that deputy ain't going to show up. He is goin' to stop in here for his usual whiskey before work. He'll get it all right—an' he won't wake up till morning."

"I still haven't done anything."

"You will. At six o'clock you walk into the jailhouse and start to talk. Fix it so's you get Logan betwixt you and the door. Then, when I come in with my gun palmed, we got him between us. He's got too much sense to buck a cross-fire. We'll get his keys, lock him in his own jail and ride out."

"You and the boys ride out," corrected Dave. "I reckon I'll be square by then. I ain't riding anywhere with you, Bat."

Christian gaped at him. "You mean you're gonna stay here an'—"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said Dave quietly. "I'm helping you get the boys loose. After that, what I do is my own business."

"Have it your way," growled the big outlaw. "Here's a sawbuck. Fill your belly an' have a time. I'm duckin'. Here comes our friend."

Christian passed inside and Dave watched Ben Logan come out of the jailhouse and plod toward him. When the lawman passed he barely raised his head. Dave found a restaurant, ate and came back to the same chair.

The sun dropped, pulled long shadows

RESPIRE FROM THE GALLOWS

across the street and dipped on into the farther west. Dusk came, bringing lamp-light to the window panes. The saloons did a sudden, swift rush of business, then emptied. The street began to clear. Dave rose, stretched and quit the porch.

* * *

Ben Logan said: "Evening, Joe," and stopped halfway out of his chair when he saw who it was. He straightened, more slowly, his face shadowed. "I thought you were my deputy," he finished. "What brings you here? Trying to get the feel of a jail, are you?"

"Yeah," murmured Dave and kept moving slowly, diagonally away from the lawman and toward the barred door to the cell block. "Might as well get used to jails; I reckon." He was fifteen feet past Logan and facing him when Bat Christian came in, gun leveled.

Ben Logan sucked in a long breath, then drove his hand toward his own gun.

"Don't!" snapped Dave. "Don't be a crazy fool!" He drew his own weapon.

Logan flicked a quick glance his way and spread his hands.

Laughing, Bat stepped in and lifted the lawman's gun.

"That was close, Tin-badge," chuckled the big outlaw. "Not that I wouldn't enjoy gut-shootin' you, but right this minute it ain't practical." And then to Dave: "Nice work, Kid. Now get his keys."

Dave came up and yanked the ring of keys from Ben Logan's belt, writhing under the oldster's accusing stare. "Once a crook always a crook," Dave heard him spit out, bitterly.

Dave made no retort. Woodenly he turned and unlocked the cell-block door, swung it wide and let Bat Christian prod Logan in before him.

Bat warned the lawman: "One peep out of you now, Tin-badge, an' yo're dead."

◇ ◇ ◇

DRAWN, haggard faces peering through the barred door of the far cell, lighted up. "Bat!" came a restrained yelp. "An' the Kid. Good ol' Bat. We knew you'd come, feller. But you sure cut 'er fine. Tomorrow—"

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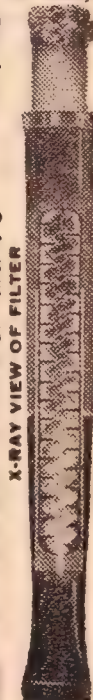
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Cut out the lip," ordered Christian gruffly. "We ain't out of the woods yet. Let 'em out, Kid." And when Dave had freed the two excited men: "Now tie up this old buzzard with blanket strips and ram a wad down his throat. You, Spider, take Logan's belt and gun."

Dave stood aside, watching the two outlaws bind the lawman hand and foot. And no matter where he moved, Logan's eyes followed him condemningly. Then words came from Dave that he had not meant to speak.

"Damn it, Sheriff, I can't help it. These men saved my life. They fed me and gave me a horse to ride when the whole damned cow-country was after my thousand-dollar hide. I promised them then that if they ever needed help—"

"You and your promises," spat Logan.

Their job done, Webfoot and Spider stood aside. Christian planted a big foot in the lawman's back and kicked hard, driving him to his face inside the cell. Logan rolled and came to a sitting position, choking behind the cruel gag. Christian locked the cell door and Dave turned away. Too late he heard Bat say:

"Webfoot, you take the Kid's gun."

Bat's swinging gun barrel caught Dave just avert the ear. From away off, he heard the big outlaw say: "He ain't no good to us no more." Then he seemed to sink deeper into a black, smothering pool.

After a long while. Dave felt himself starting up again. Slowly at first, then faster. Faster still, until he burst out into the dim jailhouse light. His head spun, hammers beat at his skull and for awhile his eyes refused to focus.

Rattling bars drew his attention. Painfully he turned. Logan, hunched on his side, was butting his head and shoulders against the steel barrier, trying desperately to attract attention.

"Cut it out," he growled. "You'll only beat your brains out." He rubbed his aching head and cursed Bat Christian's name. "I hope those twenty boys you got watching for me fill that gang so full of lead they'll sink through the ground."

He crawled to the bars, reaching through and Logan rolled away, distrusting him. "Don't be a fool," Dave urged. "I'm going to loose that gag. I don't

RESPITE FROM THE GALLOWS

reckon you can raise much fuss for a few minutes. By that time I'll be long gone. Maybe your private army will be so busy with Christian that I'll have a chance."

Logan glared at him, then rolled back. Grant removed the gag first and had the other bonds unfastened before Ben Logan could even manage a hoarse whisper. And Dave was glad that iron bars separated them. The lawman was stark, raving mad.

"Damn you!" raged Logan. "I'd been better off dead than making a bargain with you. I wish I was dead. You cheatin' crook. You told that buzzard I had men guarding this town, that they'd never get out."

"That's what you told me, Sheriff," Dave pointed out. "You wouldn't lie, would you?"

"I did lie," croaked Logan. "I don't know why I told you that. Now those buzzards have taken my girl to get them through if they get stopped. I'll kill you for tellin' 'em, McAlister. I'll make you wish—"

When the full import of the lawman's words dawned on Dave, it was like a dash of cold water in his face. He spun away, dashed into the office, searching frantically. The lawman was already beginning to holler for help, but his voice still could not carry far.

"Save your breath," ordered Dave harshly. "Where's the spare keys to this place? I'll get you out of here."

"Ain't no spare keys," cursed Logan. "Never was. It'll take a blacksmith to get me out of here."

Dave quit the jail. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious—and had forgotten to ask Ben Logan. He had to get a gun now, had to get to Ben Logan's house.

Sprinting diagonally across the dark square, he spotted a young cowboy heading for the lights and music of the main street. Dave yelled: "Hey, you!" and closed swiftly as the youngster turned, revealing the gun strapped to his middle. Dave jerked the weapon free and spun the kid with one motion.

"Get the blacksmith!" he ordered. "Some crooks locked the sheriff in his own jail and stole the keys! Get going!"

He kept moving himself, heading for



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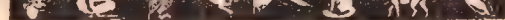
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an alley, the youngster yelling after him.

Just before he hit the street, Dave saw the kid running. That was good. He might not go straight to the smith's, but his crazy yarn would bring curious men to the jail.

There were three horses in front of Ben Logan's house and Dave charged them, there was no time to think this out or make a plan. He was still six long strides away when Webfoot's voice came:

"Pull up, whoever you are. Kid—"

Dave swerved as the big-footed man fired. The gunflash made a pony rear, exposing the man who held the reins. Dave let the hammer drop. Webfoot went back and down still clinging to the tangled reins. All three ponies shied and fought, trying to free themselves from the thing they kicked and battered.

Dave hurtled the low fence and plunged on. One was gone, but the two deadliest remained, warned now by Webfoot's yell and the sudden shots. He took the low porch in stride, batted the door aside and kept moving.

Bat Christian stood in the far corner of the lamplit room, his thick left arm was around the girl; he had two hands caught in his big left paw, using her for a shield. His first shot smashed Dave on the left side, half turning him.

The point of Christian's shoulder swung out as he made a half turn toward Dave. Dave aimed and hit it. The girl wrenched free and dropped. Dave's second shot drove the giant back into the corner. Bat Christian slid down slowly, dead.

Only Spider Toles was left. And Spider fired now from the shadows of the kitchen beyond the door. For once the deadly little man might have been rattled. Or he might have fired too fast. He hit Dave, but missed a vital spot.

A great numbness spread over Dave and he had to fight it back. He lifted his weapon with both hands, fired twice more into that dark doorway. A little later Spider appeared there; he lifted his gun deliberately and took careful aim. But there was not strength enough left in him to squeeze the trigger. He fell flat on his face.

Dave drew his arm across his face and somehow managed to stand up. The girl

RESPIRE FROM THE GALLOWES

came to him, crying: "Dave—you're hurt. You're hurt bad!" She tried to steady him but he brushed her away.

"Scatched," he mumbled. "Just scatched. So long—!"

He walked over Spider Toles and through the kitchen to the back. His own pony stood there, saddled. Spider had fetched it for the girl. Somehow Dave got into the leather. "Go, Red!" he breathed. "Go—!"

The sorrel lunged into the night and Dave laced his long fingers around the saddle horn while the world went black around him. After awhile he knew he was out on the flats of Hell's Pasture again. And sometime later he had a dim notion he was falling through space.

Strange dreams came to haunt him. He dreamed of the time he had found Ben Logan helpless and baited him with water. Only in the dream the thing was reversed. This time Logan had the water. And it was he, Dave McAlister, whose tongue was thick. Nor did he have the fortitude of the old lawman. He was croaking for water. Begging for it. And Logan was denying him. Logan was saying:

"Not until you promise me."

"Promise you what?" Dave heard himself say. "What do you want now?"

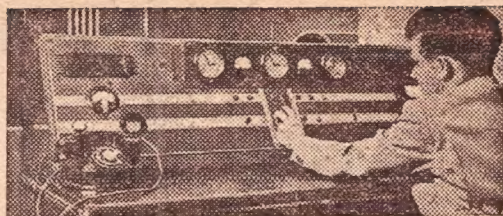
"Promise me you won't leave Desert Pass again, never no more. Promise me you'll keep your word, like you've always kept it, Kid. Hell, ain't there nothing in my town you want to see again—no-body?"

"I promise," Dave heard himself say. And Ben Logan was suddenly beside him, holding the canteen to his lips, saying:

"Easy now, you almost got too much the first time."

Then Dave felt the cool liquid touch his lips and splash down across his chest, his bandaged chest. Hell—he wasn't dreaming, not dreaming at all. And he'd just promised—just pledged himself to a new life. Logan was crazy, trusting him this way. He'd have to show the old desert sheriff that he could keep his word.

"I promise," he said again. "Honest Injun." And he fell asleep, the hard and bitter lines suddenly gone from his young face.



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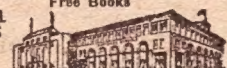
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